

KOINONIA

and the Allelous Principle



*Those who believed were of one heart and of one soul: ...
They had all things common. - Acts 4:32*

KOINONIA AND THE ALLELOUS PRINCIPLE

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They had all things common. - Acts 4:32

John H. King

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The following list of English translations might help to identify the limited use of them in this work. [<https://solarmythology.com/translations/bibles.htm>]

- AMP Amplified Bible 2015
- AMPC Amplified Bible Classic Edition 1965
- ASV American Standard Version 1901
- BBE Bible in Basic English 1965
- CEB Common English Bible, 2011
- CEV Contemporary English Version 1995 (NT - 1991)
- CSB Christian Standard Bible 2016
- CWB Clear Word Bible 1992
- ERV Easy to Read 2015
- ESV English Standard Version 2003
- ICB NCV International Children's Bible, New Century Version 1986 (NT - 1978)
- JPB J.B. Phillips New Testament in Modern English 1958 (Revised 1972)
- KJ21 Twenty-First Century King James Version 1994 (NT - 1992)
- KJV AV King James Version (also known as Authorized Version) 1611
- MLB NBV Modern Language Bible also known as New Berkley Version 1959 (NT - 1945; NT revised 1969)
- NASB New American Standard Bible (NASB) 1971 (NT - 1963; Revised 1996)
- NET New English Translation 2005
- NIrV New International Reader's Version (NIrV) 1996
- NIV New International Version 1978 (NT - 1973)
- NKJV New King James Version 1982
- NLT New Living Translation 1996
- NRSV New Revised Standard Version 1990
- TEV Good News Bible also known as Todays English Version 1974 (NT - 1966; Revised 1993)
- YLT Young's Literal Translation 1862 (Revised 1887, 1898)
- WIL Williams New Testament in the Language of the People 1937; Reprinted 2000 as Millennium edition.

... to the church in thy house - Philemon 2

Contents

Preface.....	1
Part I.....	4
Koinonia.....	5
Part II.....	24
Agape Love.....	25
Ministry.....	33
Submission.....	43
Mutuality.....	51
Truthfulness.....	59
Part III.....	66
Humility.....	68
Forgiveness.....	76
Acceptance.....	83
Intercession.....	90
Edification.....	100
Hospitality.....	107
Unity.....	116
Controversy.....	121
The Challenge.....	124
The Church.....	125
Jethro's Counsel.....	140
The Challenge.....	149
The Cross.....	159
Epilogue.....	163

Preface

I have written over 30 books [see final page], some of them as few as 100 pages, one of them over 450 pages but mostly around 200 to 300 pages. I have been wanting to get acquainted with “Me.” After being dismissed by two congregations, and finding church boards difficult to work with, I began a deep self-introspective journey. Some of my books are autobiographical going all the way back into my childhood, and some of my books are theological or doctrinal, but all in an effort to get to know “Me.”

It is difficult to push back on opposition unless you know you're right and they're wrong, but this is easier said than done. I spent 10 years in college and came away with three pieces of paper they called degrees but I kept wondering if that was the path that I should've taken or that I wanted to take. It was always important for the Lord to somehow affirm that I was on the right path in terms of His will. But I still had questions about “Me” who was the “Me” that God was calling and what I should believe.

I liked to take the Greek and Hebrew text to Bible studies and sometimes ramble on about things of no interest to most students of the Word. I think I have a different perspective on some theology, although, not for the sake of arguing but just because it is what I believe. And I am getting to know myself better. But I advise myself caution when sharing my view because most people don't care about Biblical grammar like I do and they may not understand what I am saying.

The Assemblies of God Eastern District Presbytery when I went for ordination called me “vague” and didn't ordain me. In

Preface

1974 I gave up my A of G license over a disagreement which violated a long standing principle of mine that involved a friendship. For over a year I would assist in independent ministry until I applied for credentials with the the International Fellowship of Christian Assemblies, another pentecostal group. It would be a dozen or so years before I would be ordained with them.

I think the biblical languages as a study might have been problematic for me because, I kept asking questions about church doctrines that I could not find in the Bible. Other times I would see something there that seemed far more important than it's reputation suggested in sermon notes. Somethings should have been doctrinally significant but were not—according to me.

This was not an overnight revelation, as if I could claim that God was telling me something. This was a slow unfolding, learning process, that eventually I came to believe was leading me somewhere and what eventually became what—back in the day—I might have called my “vision.”

There is much I found out about myself in looking back and in noticing where I came from. I agreed that when you finally have a point in the past and a point in the present, you can draw a line and it will point in the direction you are going. But while in the experience, I confess, one does not necessarily know where it leads.

So I wrote over 30 books to myself because I wanted to see what I was all about. I learned through self-retrospection that I was not perfect, but also, not always wrong either. I learned that I was not alone—not the only minister who lived with the same doubts and hurts. I was able see my past through a different pair of eyes, a reality that slowly, but inevitably, came to my attention as I, too, got to know “me.”

Speaking at the Charismatic Conference at Duquesne University in '79 was most memorable like it wasn't even me who was doing the teaching; it was so personally inspiring. But later when I spoke at the Full Gospel Businessmen's Fellowship, it felt like it was a mistake. I mention these because these events were very telling, though, we are not saying here in what way.

Preface

The difference in these experiences was not immediately evident to me but as I ruminated over them I gave them differing weights of importance in terms of my vision and understanding of Scripture. It was a good meditative moment!

The good news is that I think I am getting acquainted at last with myself and I think we are going to be friends, me and “me.” The good news is that I’m beginning to understand myself in a way that helps me reconcile with my past failings—and successes. I am Okay now with the fact that I am different. I like me even though I am so different from all my other friends.

I have read some of my books or parts of them again and I believe God might be helping me in this heartfelt project. Perhaps, because of these talks I had with myself and the times I prayed, I want to write this one remaining book to complete the journey. This book is the summary of my life’s quest [though it is not autobiographical] for the holy-grail of Biblical truth. It should share with the reader: why I went in the direction I took—though it, at times, seemed to spell failure—what my vision was that appeared so controversial in an age of the mega-church momentum, and why I am at last at peace about all of it.

John

Part I

Koinonia is the Greek New Testament word for “fellowship.” It is far more than what we might call community. Fellowship is not a Zoom meeting or social media conversation. Koinonia is not a Sunday Morning Church service, though perhaps, it might be experienced there on occasion. Koinonia is not an example of a move of God, though clearly it is the result of one. It is because koinonia has a particular New Testament meaning that I would encourage every believer to make it a part of their vocabulary and not attempt a translation. In introducing this Biblical word we might use a dozen or so English words that together—like a telescope uses a combination of lenses or mirrors to collect light and make the planets and stars larger for viewing—will make koinonia a cherished Christian experience.

Koinonia

Those who believed were of one heart and of one soul:... They had all things common. - Acts 4:32

If there is one word in English that comes closest to describing the Greek term, Koinonia, it is "sharing" It is not our word, fellowship, which most translators have chosen. I recommend learning the Greek term and bringing it into the English language on its own merit because its Biblical nuance is inspired by a divine revelation that sets it apart from ordinary terms in our language. Our words are in a real sense "ordinary" and have been tainted with cultural meaning that will not serve the Biblical message of Christian community or who we are as the Body of Christ.

- Koinonia is a "sharing." Koinonia is shared resources, provisions, money: "For it hath pleased them of Macedonia and Achaia to make a certain koinonia [contribution] for the poor saints which are at Jerusalem" [Romans 15:26].
- Koinonia is sharing an experience: "The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not the koinonia [communion] of the blood of Christ? The bread which we break, is it not the koinonia [communion] of the body of Christ?" [1 Corinthians 10:16].
- Koinonia is a shared ministry: "Always in every prayer of mine for you all making request with joy, For your koinonia [fellowship] in the gospel from the first day

Koinonia

until now; Being confident of this very thing, that he which hath begun a good work in you will perform *it* until the day of Jesus Christ:" [Philippians 1:4-6].

- Koinonia is shared suffering. "That I may know him, and the power of his resurrection, and the koinonia [fellowship] of his sufferings, being made conformable unto his death" [Philippians 3:10].

Commonality

Koinonia is commonality, "them that believed were of one heart and of one soul: neither said any of them that ought of the things which he possessed was his own; but they had all things *common*." [Acts 4:32].

This is where many probably draw the line, thinking that stewardship, as taught in some ministries, means they own nothing that is simply and only their own. Even the widow gives her mite to enrich the coffers of another. Some think the zeal of the early church at this time in Acts 4 was misplaced or unwise which seemed to end in the needless death of a couple who thought 50% of their assets was better than a tithe. I am talking about Ananias and Sapphira in Acts 5. Who could have known that lying to the Spirit was a death sentence! In saying this, of course, I misrepresented the spirit of the text. But the point is that a Christian fellowship that so spontaneously and totally surrenders what they have to help others in need is a fellowship soon to be in need itself. If all our funds are collected for the poor box, whose going to pay the rent? It was called "the age of infancy and innocence" by Matthew Henry.

There is a modern notion that the Biblical message here is one of an active communistic form of governance and not a free market system approach. But it isn't the government subsidizing the needs of a poor populous that it impoverished that we have here but a Christian charity that "one heart" a koinonia of heart is responding to. If God is behind this—and we hope to show that koinonia is a necessary part of the plan of God for believers—nothing in the text suggests God isn't a good

Koinonia

economist. Nor are we to assume that they sold their own homes out from under themselves, but other real estate they owned which was probably comparable to selling a market share of one's wealth today to help a neighbor.

In America, one's homestead not only speaks of ownership but freedom; so, some might think carefully about how they raise the funds to feed the poor and offer them a share in the bounty God blessed them with!

But the larger question for Christians is: Was koinonia a misguided zeal of the early believers or is it important in some way for the life of the church now?

Covenant

Koinonia is a covenantal term because it speaks of a mutual relationship and not reciprocity [I give to get]. It is a heart felt participation in a committed interest in giving toward a need. Koinonia therefore is more than a single activity but an identity. You give because you are a giver. You participate because you have joined others in a common yoke of service—because you are yoked together with Christ [Matthew 11:29]. You can truthfully say that you identify with Christ in koinonia.

Koinonia is not a social "warmth" as it might be understood in modern speech. Koinonia is participation. This is why sitting in a darkened room listening to a Christian concert or to a preacher through social media, T.V., or radio, is not sufficient to represent koinonia. Just being in attendance does not make anyone a participant.

Covenantal means dialog, learning, sharing, praying together, contributing not just time and money but of one's self—"...instructed in the kingdom of heaven," Jesus said, "like a man ... who brings forth out of his treasure things new and old. [Matthew 13:52].

Covenantal koinonia is offering to another out of the abundance of one's heart. It is sharing a piece of one's own self, their history, their testimony, their understanding, what they

Koinonia

have learned or believe God shared with them for another. As such covenantal koinonia means vulnerability because it is transparency; it is heartfelt; it is “*you*” participating in something bigger than just yourself.

Conversation

Koinonia is conversational because it is covenantal. The connection here is obvious: God’s covenant by faith restores our relationship with God and John said, “You also may have fellowship [koinonia] with us: and truly our fellowship [koinonia] is with the Father, and with his Son Jesus Christ.” [1 John 1:3]. And why use the term “conversational”? Because koinonia is a fellowship that requires our participation. No relationship—no fellowship—can be one-sided. Koinonia, as already noted, is *sharing*. Conversational speaks to a mutual expression of Christian love. Koinonia is not a sermon but a dialog because each believer participates.

We put too much weight on our own importance at times when we should be submitting to another. Peter learned this truth: “all of you be subject one to another, and be clothed with humility:” [1 Peter 5:5].

A group of believers with one after another sharing what God’s voice means to them, God’s Word and prayer means to them, will encourage the weary. Your testimony of how God brought you through a difficult place another will bear witness to in their own experience and add their confirmation to the power and love of God. And all the while, someone is listening. It is important not to monopolize the moment but share it. Koinonia is “sharing” and here: in a conversational way.

Commitment

Koinonia is commitment and commitment is faithfulness and faithfulness is perpetual, that is, no fixed end date. This is way marriage contracts are marriage covenants “until death.” If this

Koinonia

were not true, the word “commitment” would be meaningless. God’s covenant with us is *eternal*. He is known by His “covenantal faithfulness.”

I had a good lawyer draw up a contract for me once. He was a nice guy and a great lawyer but no friend. I never saw him again. My relation with him was merely transactional. But fellowship is covenantal!

Friendships are covenantal. Who can say “I will be your friend for this month only or until such and such happens” and give the word “friend” any meaning! A “friend” is, “a person whom one knows and with whom one has a bond of mutual affection.” Does this mean we are somehow unfaithful if we end a friendship within the church fellowship? Of course not. But most likely true friendships will have a lingering influence on us even though there are miles between.

There is another word translated “fellowship” [not our word *koinonia*] found in 2 Corinthians 6:14 ‘what *fellowship* hath righteousness with unrighteousness? [But in the last part of the verse Paul used our word] and what *koinonia* hath light with darkness?’ The distinction between this other word and our word, *koinonia*, helps explain Paul. This word “fellowship” speaks of having a share in something—a shared asset or resource. *Koinonia* is a shared *life*, *koinonia* is commitment, and commitment is faithfulness, and faithfulness is an unbroken relationship. It is a partnership not just a participation in something. This is why we understand *koinonia* to be covenantal and not transactional. This other term [in Greek] is a simple joint adventure or transaction in which two people’s resources, time, and energy might be invested [like with the lawyer and me], but *koinonia* is a personal commitment to contribute to give of themselves for the collective benefit of the relationship. Thus in this verse Paul is saying that unrighteousness has no share [part] in the work of God. The Lord will not use the help of the unrighteous. But light and darkness have opposing *identities*. When the light comes in, the darkness flees! “For God, who commanded the light to shine out of darkness, hath shined in our hearts, to give the light of the

Koinonia

knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.” [2 Corinthians 4:6].

Light dispels the darkness; they are matter and anti-matter. If they cannot be mixed or occupy the same space, there can be no koinonia, no companionship or have anything in common. Like light filling a room, true koinonia involves the *total* believer and not just their money or resources.

I had a little fun with Artificial Intelligence asking the computer, “Which came first unity or fellowship?” If you think of it there is an unwritten relationship between the two. The computer said, “Neither. They are mutual.” We must raise this flag again later but even here we can see the role koinonia plays in uniting us and answering Jesus’ prayer [John 17:21]. Is it possible that church divisions are the result of a lack of value put on koinonia? It is possible that our word fellowship is a lifeless, plastic model of something real God gave us, koinonia, but we replaced it in our experience under human leadership?

Companionship

Paul quoted the Greek comic poet Menander in 1 Corinthians 15:33 “evil communication [companionship] corrupts good manners [morals].” In other words: A man is known by the company he keeps. If we say this using our word koinonia we might say, “A man is identified by his koinonia.” David said it in a more eloquent way: “Blessed is the man that walks not in the counsel of the ungodly, nor stands in the way of sinners, nor sits in the seat of the scornful.” [Psalm 1:1].

Koinonia is not a one time adventure into something exciting. It isn’t a visit to a concert in church to hear a new singing group. What makes it koinonia is the fact that it has become a way of life. This is why scholarship uses the word “identity.” This is what we mean by identifying with Christ in His death, because we are now dead to sin. Identifying with Christ is following Him and this is now who we are as believers in Him. This is a koinonia type fellowship..

Koinonia

A single act of generosity—even a large contribution—is not koinonia. Koinonia characterizes the giver not the gift. Koinonia is predictable, a reputed display of who one is.

Koinonia has the word “common” as part of its meaning and something is said to be common because it is recognized as happening repeatedly by many or often. It is a common activity or mindset. Koinonia is a characteristic of an entire community of persons [2 or more]. A person cannot share of themselves by themselves! So when Paul spoke of sharing [koinonia] in the sufferings of Christ, he summarized for us his calling and his life.

Kinship

It is not unusual for koinonia [fellowship] to develop lasting relations. If all this be true of friendships and companionships, how much truer is it within the family of God? It is to be expected because of the nature of koinonia within the Body of Christ. Koinonia is kinship. In Occidental cultures, like America, Acts 2 seems like a failed communism. But orientals find Acts no mystery. E. Randolph Richards commented, “The believers were acting like family.” [“Misreading Scripture with Individualist Eyes,” 244].

When the disciples asked Jesus to teach them to pray, the first 2 words were [and are] “Our Father” [Matthew 6:9]. As believers, we are all in one family, God’s family [Romans 8:15]. Richard’s went on to say, “The challenge of building a Christian community ... is the problem of living as God’s family in a fallen world.” [Ibid., 245]. We contend in this work that it is the problem of discovering koinonia.

Sadly, there are persons who come to Christ from an abusive past. Some do not have a real understanding of “family.” To some it is only biological based on genetic markers. If these persons attend a Christian ministry without ever sensing a familial relationship with other believers, without discovering a “family” in their brothers and sisters in Christ, they have not

Koinonia

learned what koinonia is all about and this to the shame of that ministry.

Here is not my place to ridicule congregations in which hurting souls hide in isolation in darkened back rows or under balcony overhangs out of sight and mind—all—in an effort to keep their Christian experience alive. They need the family that comes with koinonia [fellowship]. They might be afraid of persons in smaller groups or, perhaps, simply no “family” member in Christ approached them in a way they could recognize as friendship. In one church I attended [I was 12] another boy approached me that first Sunday to become my friend. He told me later that he sensed we would be friends and we still are almost 70 years later! He seem to pursue me on occasion to shoot pool or play ball but in a way which I appreciated his friendship. It wasn’t a church program nor was he part of a welcoming committee. In a church of upper middle class patrons, [one had a small yacht parked in his driveway] we were the bottom of the barrel folk, “poor people from the projects” type [though we did live in houses]. Because of where he came from, he seem to know where I came from. He knew me better, perhaps, than I knew myself.

Culture

Koinonia is cultural—ethos. Koinonia is what we shall call “covenant community.” It is communion with God, the Father, and Jesus, and at the same time with each other in that circle. It is the answer to Jesus prayer in John 17:21 that we might be one [united] as He and His Father are one. It is the introduction by the Spirit to a spiritual Oneness in us as the Bride of Christ. This explains why koinonia is so vital within the Church and cannot be replaced with mere form, ritual, and professionalism.

Each person coming to Christ within that fellowship is uniquely different: distinctive personalities, different strengths and experiences, varied needs, hurts, and distinct doctrines or understanding of Scripture. Yet because christian fellowship, koinonia, is based on a common faith in Christ, a common love

Koinonia

for Him, a common desire to follow Him, and a common heart, there is covenant community. What we are describing is the culture of Heaven in us provided through the Spirit. "In some way we may not fully understand, the Spirit indwells the group in a way the Spirit does not indwell the individual." Explained Randolph Richards, "We are all built together to become one, whole building: a single dwelling for his Spirit. Like it or not, we need each other. As Rodney Reeves noted, "I cannot worship God by myself." [Richards, E. Randolph; O'Brien, Brandon J., 109].

Ephesians 2:15, 19, 21 & 22 says that we are no longer part of 2 separate cultures: Jew and Gentile. Jesus died to create in each of us one and the same "new" man. We are restored into one community to God through Jesus' death. We are no longer foreigners and strangers but joint citizens with the Saints. We are in the family of God! We are collectively the Temple of God in which God's Spirit dwells.

Community

Koinonia is Community. There is, therefore, a sense in which God made it an essential feature of life in the body of Christ. Paul taught, "God hath tempered the body together, having given more abundant honor to that *part* which lacked: That there should be no schism in the body; but *that* the members should have the same care one for another." [1 Corinthians 12:24-25]. God "tempered us together." He co-mingled us or mixed us like paint colors into a single shade. He did this so that our unity would be expressed as care for one another.

We grew up in the church with an understanding that a church that is not mission's minded will not be blessed by God and will not survive. I think this has meaning but part of home missions should be included and that means: needs within a church's own congregation. It might be a stretch to say that these needs are discovered and met in the context of koinonia, but we would be hard pressed to theologically explain away such a link.

Koinonia

Maybe Acts 4:32 has a modern day application. Maybe wealthy contributors who are of “one heart” might compare hoarding money in stocks and bonds, gold and real estate as a culturally acceptable form of greed—but greed, nonetheless. And God might want them to join in Christian koinonia instead.

The brutal point to be made in writing this book is that koinonia is essential to Christianity if it is to be more than a Sunday concert or a preacher’s retirement fund. If we are serious about our salvation and witness, koinonia must be taken seriously, even if it includes a cross to bear, a sacrifice to make, a longterm commitment to honor, or a stranger to care for. And even if, it can be shown, that the koinonia of Acts 4:32 was not accomplished in the Temple Court where thousands met for public prayer but in a thousand homes around a thousand tables spread with open bibles.

Koinonia, according to the New Testament Greek dictionary is also intimate: “That which we have seen and heard declare we unto you, that ye also may have koinonia with us: and truly our koinonia is with the Father, and with his Son Jesus Christ. ... ” [1 John 1:3]. Whenever one person prays for another over a personal need or sin, this is intimacy. Whenever someone shares their testimony, it is personal; it is intimacy. Whenever the Bible study brings conviction it is intimacy. Whenever someone opens up in discussing a spiritual problem they are facing or a temptation that hinders their Christian walk or a trial challenging their faith, it is always intimacy. And it is fellowship; real koinonia.

1 John 1:7 is one of the most dynamic truths, possibly overlooked, when it comes to koinonia to address spiritual challenges in a believer’s life. In this smaller gathering where each has opportunity to serve and be served, to minister and be ministered unto, koinonia thrives on an openness within the group to contribute—even if it reveals a struggle with temptation. We may hide successfully in the larger group sitting in the darkness amongst strangers in a Sunday service or mass ... but not here, not in koinonia.

Koinonia

John taught, “But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light [these are believers], we have koinonia one with another, and the blood of Jesus Christ his Son cleanses [present tense] us from all sin [not sins but the principle of sin].”

Many Christians struggle with living for the Lord or even know what living for Him is all about. They live with guilt or a sense of failure because koinonia is absent in their experience! John Stott was reported to have explained, “What is clear is that if we walk in the light, God has made provision to cleanse us from whatever sin would otherwise mar our *fellowship* with him and each other” [The Expositor’s Bible Study, XII, 311].

“If there be therefore any consolation in Christ,” Paul spoke gratefully to the Philippians, “if any comfort of love, if any koinonia [fellowship] of the Spirit, if any bowels and mercies, Fulfill ye my joy, that ye be likeminded, having the same love, being of *one accord*, of one mind. Let nothing be done through strife or vainglory; but in lowliness of mind let each esteem other better than themselves. Look not every man on his own things, but *every man also on the things of others*.” [Philippians 2:1-4].

Confession

How effective would our testimony be without koinonia? Our koinonia is always and only around the Gospel message. “I thank my God upon every remembrance of you,” Paul confessed to the Philippian believers, “Always in every prayer of mine for you all making request with joy, for your koinonia in the gospel from the first day until now.” [Philippians 1:3-5]. Koinonia is sharing our testimony. Koinonia is sharing what the Lord is all about in our experience. Koinonia is confirming the Lord’s promises to enable us to navigate the troubled waters of this life without drowning and how God at times spoke peace to angry waves.

The Bible is The Gospel message, not only as promises made but promises kept, how the Spirit was working in our lives as Jesus said He would guide us into all truth [John 16:13].

Koinonia

Charismata

Charismata is a New Testament word representing visible or concrete manifestations of the Spirit of God. Though such a “gift” is used in Pentecostal theology about 9 particular manifestations of the Spirit in 1 Corinthians 12:4ff, our salvation is such a gift [Romans 5:15]. This word for God’s “gifts” generally represents ministry [Romans 12:6], it is clearly designed by God to function in “body” ministry which Paul defined as “every one members one of another” [Romans 12:5] “That there should be no schism in the body; but that the members should have the same care one for another.” [1 Corinthians 12:25] “for the edifying of the body of Christ: Till we all come in the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ:” [Ephesians 4:12-13]. It is theologically untenable to separate God’s gifts from koinonia.

The gifts are body ministry for the *Body* of Christ. God has equipped the Church with ministry, “one member for another” for 5 clear Biblically defined reasons, which explain koinonia best!

1. To bring about unity—which gives us a more effective evangelistic message [John 17:21].
2. To learn Christ [Matthew 11:29]
3. To mature the believer [1 Corinthians 14:12]
4. To provide for each need [2 Corinthians 8:4].
5. To overcome temptation [1 Thessalonians 5:14].

The power of koinonia [fellowship] is in the move of the Spirit in our midst. Jesus promised, that “where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them.” [Matthew 18:20]. And that power is invested in “The Fruit.”

The Fruit of the Spirit are relational at work in us, uniting us. “By love serve one another, Paul admonished the Galatian Christians, “for all the law is fulfilled ... in this.” And then he listed the 9 Fruit of the Spirit. [Galatians 5:13-14; 22-23].

Koinonia

The Fruit of the Spirit are mutual expressions of koinonia [fellowship] one toward another in Christ. To understand this better, compare the modern English use of the word “fellowship” with the biblical word for fellowship, *koinonia*.

Our word “fellowship” is social not relational. I might be invited to a church banquet or a picnic for fellowship with people I do not know. I was invited to “get to know them.” I might find them pleasant, cordial, some of the best examples of a christian, but they are still strangers to me. I still enjoyed myself, but probably will not attend their church. We ate, laughed, talked sports; they seemed interested in me, where I lived, my family, but there was no prayer time, no discussion around Jesus. My relationship with them was merely transactional. I was nice to them; they were nice to me. It was reciprocal.

Now, if the invitation to that picnic included sharing the Word and testimony in song, prayer, or dialog—that would become koinonia; for, I would immediately recognize my brothers and sisters in Christ as part of the same spiritual family I am adopted into.

Koinonia is a covenantal relationship. It is far more intimate. It is sharing one’s life with another or others. It is identifying with the persons you are with. It is being with them often—as a regular part of friendship. It is not merely social; it is spiritual because we bring our Lord into conversation through testimonies, study of God’s Word and prayer. Koinonia is spiritual support.

Koinonia has to involve the Fruit of the Spirit to work as a mutual relationship: a mutual love, joy and peace built on long suffering, kindness and goodness toward each one in the group. And this works because we have a common faith, a common desire to follow Christ, and temperance—God’s grace at work in us.

Koinonia

Caring

It is important to understand that koinonia is not a social time, a time to enjoy good feelings. I can accomplish this watching football with a friend while crunching on chips and drinking sodas [especially if our team wins]. But this is not koinonia—even though true koinonia may be experienced. While we watch sports together if the Lord's name or work comes up or in some inspiring way we recognize this friendship on a deeper level than just as "fans" we can call it fellowship. Christian fellowship goes deeper, somewhere very personal. There is a sense in which we identify with another believer—even while watching sports—Christian fellowship [koinonia] is always a part of us and how we express ourselves.

Koinonia is caring. When we discover we can share a problem within this circle in secret for prayer and not be concerned that it will be public information tomorrow, we are developing koinonia. We are sharing deep feelings; we are opening up and becoming vulnerable but still knowing that within this group there is no judgment. Sharing feelings, problems, desires, concerns, dreams—these are all part of who we are as individuals and within this closed circle there is acceptance. We are not necessarily each other's counselor; we do not primarily seek advice from this fellowship. What makes this work is the Holy Spirit in our midst and Christ within us. There is in this circle a great empathic understanding and love. The Lord can use anyone to say just the right thing in the right moment if we are open to His using us. But this is His opportunity not our responsibility.

This is where God's grace shines forth. Grace not only saves, grace in koinonia begins to expand its interest in keeping us on the straight and narrow and supporting emotional and spiritual health. Listen to one another and be in prayerful thought and koinonia happens without our effort. Our lives are a conduit for God to move through [Romans 6:13]. God's grace now in our lives flows through us to others! [Romans 5:5] *"that*

Koinonia

the members should have the same care one for another.” [1 Corinthians 12:25].

Koinonia

We know a number of Biblical words which we took directly from the original languages. To some of them we have sadly assigned weaker or anglicized meanings. What this has done is given us a false impression that we know what they mean when we do not. This is why “fellowship” will no longer serve to explain *koinonia*; so, we are recommending using the Greek word without any translation as if we were learning a brand new English word.

A few biblical terms which we get directly from the Scriptures have become part of the church’s language already, like: amen, hallelujah, [shalom?], agape, the Sabbath, Abba, cosmos, the Diaspora, rabbi, hosanna, pharisee, anathema, hubris, and our favorite, The *Logos*! These are all Greek or Hebrew words spelled the same way in the original as in English, and we borrowed them, making them a part of our language.

There are Greek words not found in the Bible but in Classical Greek which we borrowed without changing the spelling, like: paranoia and chaos—but let’s not go there! In Latin, the number of words brought over into English unchanged are —as we could say in Latin, “maximum,” but we shouldn’t get a Latin size “ego,” so, will stop here. There are a number more used in Christian theology to help those with PhD’s feel more confident in their knowledge.

I just want us to learn 2 more words: *koinonia* and *allelous*. I already told my computer’s spell check about them and they are in my English dictionary on my computer. We will get to “allelous” later. *Allelous* is the major part of this book. It simply means “one another.” We get 2 words for the price of 1— not a bad deal.

Koinonia

If there is anything to a current fulfillment of Biblical end time prophecy, the Christian church would be wise to review and [in some cases] revive the Biblical idea of koinonia if they want to be an effective and powerful witness and if there is a serious continued interest in discipleship.

Hidden in the biblical record, the history of the early church, is a representative application of koinonia that in our civilized world has been lost to church banquets and concerts in which most believers will not find koinonia: sharing with others what God has been giving them to share. The larger church gathering of Christians is often a one way transaction from platform to pew and not a covenantal mutuality or bonding of servant to served. And we may soon discover that without this “familial” spirit among believers, the coming persecution will overtake us by surprise—as Jesus said, “that day [will] come upon you unawares.” [Luke 21:34].

Ah! You contend, Jesus’ comment was for non-believers!

But the entire context of our Lord’s prophecy is as a warning that we keep looking for His returning. I contend that a Sunday morning ritual will never suffice to keep as alert. Observe the phrase *one another* in Hebrews 10:24. This is our word *allelous*! It speaks of a mutual exhorting—back and forth—and not the preacher’s alone!

The writer to the Hebrews admonished, “And let us consider *one another* to provoke unto love and to good works: Not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as the manner of some is; but exhorting one another: and so much the more, as ye see the day approaching.” [Hebrews 10:24-25].

When we assigned this task solely to the preacher we lost koinonia because koinonia is a mutual sharing, a mutual participation, adding our voice to others across the room and around the circle in various tones of affirmation that our Lord is on the way back; so, we must support each other’s desire to stay prepared and alert!!

Koinonia

Coming Together

Christians may not realize the gravitation pull in a spiritual sense by the Spirit of God bringing them together. When God made us first in His image, then in Christ's image, as believers, then birthed the Church, He made us one in heart. There are forces which unsuccessfully will attempt at scattering us because when believers are united there is no mountain that cannot be moved. Jesus taught this in Matthew 21:21-22. The "you" in these verses is *plural* referring to the disciples. I am wondering if this is a "collective" you, indicating a united prayer. We read words that suggest such unity: "Then pleased it the apostles and elders, with the whole church, ... it seemed good to the Holy Ghost, and to us" [Acts 15:22, 28].

I don't want to disparage the efforts of scholarly leaders to build churches or bring people together, but only God has perfected unity among believers. Only God has perfected koinonia. The root word in koinonia is our word "common." Through the Spirit's work, all believers have a common mindset [Romans 12:16], a single heart [Ezekiel 11:19], one faith [Ephesians 4:5], etc. The gathering of the saints together into His kingdom is God's work not man's [John 11:52]. Koinonia is that force!

Men might find attractive ways of luring the curious—maybe by famous speakers or a hopeful message or through modern conveniences, such as: coffee shops, books stores, air time, etc—but only God can give true believers a reason for staying and that is connected to the move of the Spirit. Church programs become mechanical if the Spirit does not breathe them alive. There is no preacher that doesn't know this to be true.

Conclusion

This book is written to explain koinonia: its meaning and significance to Christian believers in these final days. Without koinonia our faith will be stressed beyond measure. Koinonia is

Koinonia

far more than a Sunday gathering. The early church was empowered by it because koinonia became a mutual support network set up to minister to physical and emotional needs as well as spiritual. Koinonia was the Spirit at work using one to ministering to another; it was a sharing, elevated by a passionate interest in giving. Koinonia was a mutually loved familial interest among believers, a desire to exercise their privilege as a citizen of heaven because they had the Arrabon, “the earnest of the Spirit in their hearts” [2 Corinthians 1:22].

Through koinonia we support each other’s desire to stay prepared and alert for our Lord’s return!! When we assigned the task solely to the preacher to oversee our faith we lost koinonia. Koinonia is part of the new covenant; it is a mutual participation, adding our voice to others around the circle in exciting affirmation that our Lord is on His way back.

Koinonia embraces the multifold ministry of Ephesians 4 & Romans 12. But how do we maintain koinonia? We review the scriptures that speak of Christian interaction or how we relate to “one another” [allelous]. This is the burden of this book. We will look into the apostles’ use of allelous, “one another,” as attributes of or characterizing koinonia.

Allelous

For Christian fellowship, koinonia, ultimately to be a divine force against evil and a dynamic, vibrant witness for goodness, there needs to be a spiritual quality to our allelous [Christian relationships]. This, according to scripture, is circumscribed by the purest:

1. Love: Agape, for one another as Christ loved. [Ephesians 4:2] *leading to*
2. Ministry: Each one having the call of God in their heart to serve/participate in some way as the Spirit leads. Each one willing to give and not receive, to serve instead of lead. [Galatians 5:13] *leading to*

Koinonia

3. Submission: Each one willing to receive from each other, to allow Christ through others to minister to them. [Ephesians 5:21] *leading to*
4. Mutuality or a covenantal relationship rather than a transactional one. Not a give to get [reciprocal one] but an exchange, a dialog, a joint or joining of all, a common interest, a singleness of heart. The mutual awareness that I love and am loved; that I know and am known by God. [1 Corinthians 12:25] *leading to*
5. Truthfulness: Characterized by an honest and transparent self-discovery and godly motives. [Ephesians 4:25] *leading to*
6. Humility: Characterized by an abandonment to the Lord's Leadership, a recognized and total dependance on His Will. [Philippians 2:3] *leading to*
7. Forgiveness: A mutual and complete forgiveness actively leading to reconciliation among all believers. [Ephesians 4:32] *leading to*
8. Acceptance: A welcoming and inclusion of all Believers. God's grace in action. [Romans 15:7] *leading to*
9. Intercession: A heart for prayer, a readiness to carry burdens of others, privately, and without judgment. [James 5:16] *leading to*
10. Edification: A singular interest in the spiritual growth of others as evident in their testimonies in support of God's desire toward each one. [Romans 14:19] *leading to*
11. Hospitality: No cliques, open acceptance of others beyond those who are already part of us. An honest welcoming to others in need of our ministry without qualification. [1 Peter 4:9] *leading to*
12. Unity: The ultimate goal of Jesus' prayer for our oneness. A single emphasis—the Cross and its provisions becoming part of each life and faith walk. [Romans 12:16]

Part II

Allelous is the Greek word for “one another” which speaks of 5 qualities described in apostolic teaching that to me support koinonia. A christian gathering should exhibit these naturally as aspects of the “new” persons they have become in Christ and that make up “the Church” in Biblical terms. These are all allelous ideas, which we need to affirm are part of our fellowship in order to realize genuine koinonia: Agape Love, Ministry [serving others] , Servanthood [allowing others to minister to us], Mutuality [not reciprocity], and Truthfulness.

Agape Love

“With all lowliness and meekness, with long-suffering, forbearing one another in love;” - Ephesians 4:2

The word *allelous* in the subtitle of this work is simply the Greek term for “one another.” Obviously, it is only in the plural; if someone is doing something alone or for themselves there are other words for that. “One another” refers to 2 or more believers in a mutual and covenantal relationship. By a “mutual covenant” we mean that what we do for each other is based on a giving heart and not an agreed upon exchange. We do not barter our love for one another—as if to say, “I’ll do this for you if you do this for me.”

In marriage husbands are not encouraged to love their wives only on condition they are submissive; nor are wives enjoined to be submissive only if their husbands are loving. If Jesus’ love for us was ever on condition, no one would be saved. We know this. We call it God’s grace. But we fail to recognize that the same grace—unmerited favor—is to be offered to those in relation to us, as well. This is mutuality as opposed to reciprocity: a freely given love as opposed to a purchased love where the price of my affection is your affection toward me.

Love is the Fulcrum

Look at Ephesians 4:2, 32, which reads, “With all lowliness and meekness, with longsuffering, forbearing one another in love; ... And be ye kind one to another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God for Christ’s sake hath forgiven you.”

Agape Love

In verse 2 the word, lowliness, or *humility*, is introduced to us by the Apostle Paul [There as no such word before he came and defined it]. Richard Trench adds, “springing out of and resting on the sense of unworthiness.” Trench said of *meekness*: “Revelation has given to these words [the meek and meekness], a depth, a richness, a fullness of significance, which they were very far from possessing before.” [Trench, XLII, 150, 151]. He meant that Greek writers looked down on meekness as cowardice. But with Paul it is a gentle and kind disposition, a desire to be kind and cooperative. With God it speaks of a strong passion to do His will.

Then in verse 32, Paul spoke of *kindness* and *tenderheartedness* that should characterize the believer. Kindness is a quality shown often from a superior to and inferior, the “haves” to the “have nots.” Tenderheartedness is compassion. According to the Theological Dictionary tenderheartedness becomes a synonym for love, but, “love as the mutual experience and gift among Christians” [Kittel, VI, 551]. In the Gospels: “Outside the parables of Jesus, there is no instance of the word being used of men. It is always used to describe the attitude of Jesus and characterizes the divine nature of his act.” [Ibid, 553]. Tenderhearted speaks more to who God is. “God is love” [1 John 4:16]. It is His nature. God is tenderheartedness.

Then we read the word *forgiving* as it pertains to Christian fellowship or *koinonia*. A quick review of its use elsewhere shows that it means “to give” or bestow as an unmerited gift—which is exactly what our forgiveness is when given to one another. “Forgiveness is mutually required in the community.” [Kittel, IX, 397].

So in these 2 verses: On one side of the scale we have humility and meekness [a sense of unworthiness of our salvation] and on the other tenderheartedness and forgiveness [the action that is based on this sense of unworthiness] with the fulcrum being Agape love. To the degree we have a heartfelt awareness of how loving God has been to us, we will in turn be toward others. “Beloved, if God so loved us, we ought also to love one another.” [1 John 4:11]

Agape Love

A Quality not a Duty

Love among Christians is a quality of who they are in Christ, not a duty or a law to be obeyed. Loving one another based on our forgiveness of one another and a deep humility or sense of our own unworthiness when we learn of all we inherit in Christ—these traits—now characterize koinonia.

After leaving one ministry for another ["Out of the frying pan into the fire," was the way my pastor described it from his own experience] I made a pact within myself not to take the Bible so seriously but to be more relaxed letting life roll on while I spent less time involved in koinonia, Christian community. I would at least take Mondays off! I would limit myself to one phone in the house and never answer it on Mondays or Christmas day! I began to envy pastors who took sabbaticals! It was a mild jealousy. And maybe in sermons I might speak more of what God has promised us in Covenant relationship and not about what we promised Him—the cross we would bear for Him. But the big change might be: no more looking up Greek words!!

But even when despondent I found, as Jeremiah wrote, "His word was in mine heart as a burning fire shut up in my bones, and I was weary with forbearing, and I could not stay" [Jeremiahs 20:9]. We need koinonia! It is a fire within to be involved, to care, to love, to forgive.

I thought: How nice it would be were I a monk enjoying a monastic life. I am told that Anthony the Great [St. Anthony of Egypt, c. 251–356 AD], the "father of monasticism" upon hearing the Gospel call, gave away his possessions and began ascetic practices. He withdrew deeper into the desert for complete solitude, living in tombs, old forts, and remote mountains. His goal was intense, uninterrupted communion with God. I am reminded of a poem: *The Preacher's Mistake* by William Crosswell Doane:

Agape Love

THE PARISH PRIEST
Of austerity,
Climbed up in a high church steeple
To be nearer God,
So that he might hand
His word down to His people.

...

And in sermon script
He daily wrote
What he thought was sent from heaven,
And he dropped this down
On his people's heads
Two times one day in seven.

In his age God said,
"Come down and die!"
And he cried out from the steeple,
"Where art thou, Lord?"
And the Lord replied,
"Down here among my people."

A Requirement for Fellowship

Every believer needs to be aware that they, too, are different from everyone else. Forgiveness and humility are necessary expressions of Christian love. That's why God wrote these words on our hearts, even if we struggle to wrap our heads around them.

We will never be happy as believers in Christ if we have to practice our faith in secret, if being with other believers is a chore or only a painful reminder of hurtful times or because church leadership was not what we thought leadership should be. The likelihood is that even in this you are not alone. In Christian community you might find an empathy worthy of the label Christian love.

We all need love, even if we are less capable of recognizing it. What did the song writer write, "...still somehow, it's love's illusions I recall; I really don't know love, at all." Not

Agape Love

true! For a believer, you know God's love for you, and the best source of that love is from other believer's in Christian koinonia [fellowship].

Naïveté

My personal journey was one of sterling naïveté. To say I was not street wise understates my excited anticipation of how pastoring was going to go—everyone loves everyone else! Thank God for Christians!

I grow up with maladies that somewhat kept me out of the middle of things that kids normally do to get into trouble. [Not totally.] I had a grandmother and uncle [on my mother's side] who joined mom in hovering over me [like an eagle over its chicks] when I was seriously ill. Mom took me to tent meetings, healing services, and even a local preacher's small gathering in his home, to pray and pray and pray over me for all kinds of healing. Simply said: I knew love!

I had no way of knowing how cruel some church people could be. Anything in my life that might have been slightly eschew ethically was thought to be simply how life goes and I was very much at peace when I was not in physical distress. I didn't know abuse. I didn't lack for attention and love even though we were quite poor. One Christmas my toys were compliments of the Salvation Army toy drive. I still found Christmas day lots of fun, maybe more because of family, though I didn't figure that out at the time.

So when I began pastoring, I underwent culture shock followed by a growing anxiety and I desire to run away—which I did. I left the shore of one state for the mountains of another, knowing that if I got away from my problems far enough, they couldn't find me.

Well, you know where this is going! If the very Christians we need to be happy make us miserable, did God mess up?

Agape Love

A New Thing

Isaiah 43:19 reads, “Behold, I will do a new thing; now it shall spring forth; shall ye not know it? I will even make a way in the wilderness, and rivers in the desert.”

Claus Westermann wrote in his commentary, “Israel requires to be shaken out of a faith that has nothing to learn about God’s activity, and therefore nothing to learn about what is possible with him, the great danger which threatens any faith that is hidebound in dogmatism, faith that has ceased to be able to expect anything really new from him.”

Walter Brueggemann in his commentary called this new thing “a cosmic transformation whereby an arid landscape is transposed into a fountain of water that will make new life possible.” [Brueggemann, 51]. The first 39 chapters of Isaiah’s prophecy were full of judgment. Now it is full of forgiveness because God’s suffering servant is soon to appear in that arid landscape [Isaiah 53:2].

When I began in ministry God shared this verse with me one Sunday morning during a song service [long story]. But I didn’t know why I should be so fixed on this verse or so intent on owning its message in a more personal way—not just as Jewish history. I think I know now.

It was as if everything I knew about people and ministry had been wrong, no theology was ever worth its explanation, and life became a lesson in philosophy that no one—least of all, I—wanted to study. Every dream I dreamt that saw ministry as something miraculous, and saw me as an important part of that miracle, was a lie—not God’s lie; my lie because it was my dream. Doors were slammed shut when I sought to walk through. Bridges were burned behind me; so, I had no past to return to. The Bible has a good word for this when there is only one direction, straight ahead: tribulation. And Paul in Romans 5 gloried in it. According to Paul [Romans 5:3-4] until God gets us where we are going, we have to learn patience—another word

Agape Love

for waiting on God. Only in tribulation we had no choice in the matter. But patience meant experience.

What I didn't know then was that experience is knowledge. That's God's post-graduate degree program. The Greeks have a maxim: *pathei mathos* [learning by suffering]. It had a different context for them than us. For us, as someone once said about Isaiah 43:2, God is taking us into deep waters because the devil doesn't know how to swim.

And what do we learn? Love! God's love for us and God's love in us and through us.

What I discovered

What I discovered through the years is the substance of this book, that, when all else is torn from us, the cherished past, the hoped for tomorrows, the dreams, the persons we loved and the persons we came to love, what remains is the real you or me standing before God in silence, humbled and naked of all personal ambitions. As Job summed up his experience, "I will lay mine hand upon my mouth." [Job 40:4].

Maybe you didn't really know yourself before God introduced you to you. Now you get to meet yourself for the first time. Maybe life was so busy with other peoples' things that you didn't know what was yours. Maybe you thought that any love had been ripped out of you only to discover that God's love was underneath all the feelings you were hoarding and that are no longer there.

Isaiah 43:2 also spoke of a fire. I know there was once a burning bush that was not consumed, but fire generally—the science says—must be fed to continue to burn. The fire will not set you ablaze, You are not its fuel. But what was burdening you down ... is! Isaiah will explain shortly: "Behold, ... I have chosen thee in the furnace of affliction." [Isaiah 48:10].

Turns out, if I had been allowed to choose my life's path to walk down, I probably would have been neck deep in hieroglyphics or researching the history of the linear 'B' text and

Agape Love

the beginnings of the alphabet. [And I was never needed there!] I would have learned nothing about the power of love to climb impossible heights or overcome unconquerable adversity. I would not have discovered the love of God other than reading about it in an ancient text where it isn't alive nor does it make alive.

The people of God—and this is the core truth—the people of God have become my life. I have never been more fulfilled than digging out a ditch with Charlie—me in my suit and tie—to bring running water into his 2 room home for him and his wife. I was never more fulfilled that when I endured the “wrath” of the trustees to purchase without their permission the necessary supplies to winterize Ann’s 2 room home—and deal with the bees another time. Ann was a single elderly shut in member of the church—one of a few I visited before the snow flew to make sure they were safe. I was never more fulfilled than when after being away for some years, I took to my old ways and started revisited people. One was Gizella, who was recently widowed and to her surprise Joyce and I show up at her front door out of nowhere to pray with her!

I could go on.

We will never exhaust our interest in God’s people because we were made for Koinonia and Allelous!

Ministry

“by love serving one another” - Galatians 5:13

The “Professor Archive,” an independent educational channel on YouTube put out a documentary on “The Pastor Crisis That Could Reshape Christianity in America.” It concluded, “The crisis is forcing American Christianity to rediscover its essentials. When traditional structures break down, communities must identify what's truly necessary for spiritual life and what's merely traditional preference.”

There are 2 take aways here: One, rediscovering essentials is what we are all about in this work. And the second is less obvious but important: The Gospel has always transcended culture which means we should be able to have an effective ministry anywhere God sends us regardless of cultural drift. We do not alter our message, only the parabolic outer garment it wears: how we tell it. The Gospel must remain what it has always been. This is why, perhaps, God kept it simple—perhaps, too simple for educated societies to appreciate without embellishing it with the phylacteries of a technical age.

So, when we discuss ministry in terms of absolute essentials, does this boil down to nothing more than a Bible and a heart for God? Is Paul's Covenantal Theology essential learning and do we need a college education to know what he taught? How many Christians in the global north can appreciate a Bible study on a hot summer evening without air conditioning, if it is unaffordable. What is “essential”?

We are arguing here that you and I and the Lord are the essentials. Paul and Silas held service once in a Philippian jail

Ministry

cell, “And at midnight Paul and Silas prayed, and sang praises unto God: and the prisoners heard them.” [Acts 16:25]. The warden believed and his household joined him in baptism.

Just before this, at the river’s edge, Paul held a prayer meeting, which led to the salvation of an influential business woman. “And a certain woman named Lydia, a seller of purple, of the city of Thyatira, which worshipped God, heard *us*: whose heart the Lord opened, that she attended unto the things which were spoken of Paul.” [Acts 16:14]. I doubt it was planned weeks ahead of time knowing how famous Paul’s conversion and testimony had become. We probably would have rented out a large auditorium and sold tickets knowing his popularity.

None of this was part of this inspiring account in which God, without announcement or prearrangement, led Lydia to where Paul was.

We have come to think that some things are “essential” that are not. This book is not recommending we get rid of the cultural bells and whistles, but that we simply don’t miss them if they have to go or be replaced by others. Jesus said, as we noted already when you conduct a prayer meeting, “For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them.” [Matthew 18:20].

Christ in us

Paul was a simple preacher, in terms of our current scientific and technical knowhow. How do we present the message of God’s love without computers and a good sound system? How do we effectively bring the Gospel to others without the sanctuary designed for complete creature comfort and a lot of parking spaces?

Well, Paul said that the secret to God being revealed and glorified is *in you*! “*Even* the mystery which hath been hid from ages and from generations, but now is made manifest *to his saints*: To whom God would make known what *is* the riches of the glory of this mystery among the Gentiles; which is Christ *in*

Ministry

you, the hope of glory: Whom we preach, warning every man, and teaching every man in all wisdom; that we may present every man perfect in Christ Jesus: Whereunto I also labour, striving according to his working, which works *in me* mightily. [Colossians 1:26- 29].

What is essential is you! Your testimony! Your presence! Your friendship? Your passion for Christ! *You!*

The Contest

Already in reading this you have figured out that I like a small group of believers gathered in someone's living room for a prayer meeting or bible study. Yes! In a sense, in this setting we get to practice our faith, so that, out there in the real world we will be better at living it.

The writer to the Hebrews spoke of running a race in Hebrews 12:1. The writer actually called it "our appointed contest." The race believers must run—called life—is no accident, nor is it a race we organized. We were "destined" to run it. God planned this. For most of us this is no sprint but a marathon and as such [staying with the metaphor] shouldn't we upon rising each morning jog a mile or two to train for it! I can guess that some believers enter the race from their couch. Feeling frisky and energized, they jump up and out the door heading for the starting line thinking they have this race "in the bag."

But as any one who enters a contest to win knows, you train first; develop the right muscle sets, eat proper nourishment that supports endurance contests ... and the like. And no one trains alone. We need coaches and spotters and people to maintain our equipment .. And the like.

Where am I going in all this?

Well, we need the smaller group times together—not to banter [yes, a little] but to talk about this race we are in and in our gathering together [our allelous] to prepare to run, prepare to face the world that we are called to as witnesses for Christ.

Ministry

The writer spoke of “weight” and “besetting sin.” We may need help with these—getting rid of them, throwing them off! The word weight speaks of any mass or bulk we shouldn’t be carrying in a race. Goes without saying! My first thought was, the writer thinks some of us are overweight. We sit around eating chips and drinking soda [we are still in our metaphor] watching T. V. And playing electronic games. partying, whatever, and then expect to win when we run! This is a metaphor for “worldliness.” It has to go and I do know I need your help to get rid of it! In that smaller study group or prayer meeting, you have become my trainer—*surprise!*

And I am yours!

Provocation

In Hebrews 10:25 the writer admonished, “Not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as the manner of some *is*.” We probably thought he was referring to going to church, but notice the all-important context: focused on *allelous* [one another] in order to provoke to love and good works. The Expositor’s Bible agrees with us here about the phrase: one another. “He is speaking of a mutual activity, one in which believers encourage one another, not one where leaders direct the rest as to what they are to do.” [Expositors, XII, 105].

Create a provocation?! I can’t in clear conscience water down this word to mean “urge” or “stimulate” when it sounds more like “irritate,” “aggravate.” In the Bible, this is the only time it is used in a positive sense. Everywhere else it means to exasperate or exacerbate or enrage. [Don’t snap at me! Don’t be short with me! Who do you think you are? My trainer!]

The writer spoke of “a provocation of love and good works.” Is this “hard love!” I don’t know.

But I do know that this is *allelous* at work in *koinonia*. This is not a Sunday morning “love-fest.” Some real truth is being shared here. If I am in this group, I am more than a little

Ministry

conscious of the seriousness of my witness to the world and my getting prepared, as Christ's bride, for the wedding.

Staying with our metaphor from Hebrews 12, I am in training to run ... and finish the course!

Oddly enough, I can see why I might need to be [as the NIV put it] spurred on to do good works. But "to love"? Am I being accused of not loving enough! Let's read the Expositor's Bible again: "It is the characteristic New Testament term for a love that is not self seeking, a love, whose paradigm is the cross [1 John 4:10]. This is a most important Christian obligation and believers are to help one another attain it. It is interesting that this kind of love is thus a product of community activity, for it is a virtue that requires others for its exercise."

I once blurted out in anger at someone accusing me of something, "Only Jesus gets to talk to me like that!" Well, maybe I didn't, but it is still what I thought. And what about Jesus using someone else to tell me something I need to hear something "hard" to listen to?

I think the beauty of this context is that it is the group provoking the group—it is not a confrontation between 2 but the Spirit of God turning up the volume on something said that He wants all of us to hear.

Now that's love!

Support Groups

Is allelous satisfied in specialized support groups for addictions or marriages in crisis or other social problems addressed by the church? Is allelous satisfied in the smaller gatherings focused on discipleship or studying the latest sermon or book by someone renowned?

All of these are functionally beneficial but they cannot replace the koinonia that by its very nature places each member's life in the spot light by the dialog allelous engenders.

Ministry

Often smaller groups are organized in support of the larger group, the church, in order to maintain support for it, its pastor, the mortgage, building maintenance, staff salaries, etc. While, again, allelous is a ministry designed to prepare each member of this smaller group to run that race Hebrews spoke of.

When I attend a home gathering that is focused on the larger group, the larger church, I am still a non-participant, which is not koinonia, as we pointed out. For me to participate, someone needs to care about my contribution, about me—as I must care about the others in this smaller gathering.

Spiritual Growth

Allelous in koinonia must not be confused with what Brad House, Senior Executive Pastor of Woodside Bible Church, Detroit, called a “MultiChurch.” Pastor House has written extensively on the “MultiChurch.” A MultiChurch is one church that “engages in worship, perhaps with a common liturgy among the congregations and in multiple services across multiple locations in the city. [MultiChurch: Exploring the Future of Multisite. Kindle Edition].

Pastor House added, “Today, over 5 million people worship in one of the more than 8,000 multisite churches, making up 9 percent of American Protestant churchgoers and 3 percent of American Protestant churches.” This amount to an average congregation of 500-600 members.

This is to be distinguished from the Missional Church idea begun in the early '90's. “A church planter who is missional, wrote Ed. Stetzer, “is focused on God’s mission, being aware of what God is doing in the culture and joining him in his work. A missional church is willing and eager to engage the culture with the truths of the Gospel.” [Stetzer, 20].

A MultiChurch is a structural model of multiple cooperating congregations, whereas a missional church represents a theological identity as a mission’s minded people participating in God’s home missions. Both models emphasize

Ministry

church growth and *not* believer spiritual health and growth—which is the focus of koinonia and allelous.

“Is this form [multisite] of church biblical?” Pastor House asked, “What effect does multisite have on the spiritual growth ... of people?” He wrote his work, *MultiChurch: Exploring the Future of Multisite* to answer this question.

The missional church paradigm does not formally deny spiritual growth, but its primary emphasis is outward. This shift of emphasis is exactly the concern many pastors raise. Pastors and congregants alike are beginning to ask whether or not the “church” is of spiritual benefit to them and, sadly, in some cases, some leave.

This quick scan of these 2 church models is intended to prevent an confusion in the mind of any reader whether or not koinonia and allelous are competitive ideas. They are *not*! It has to be up to the local church to evaluate the claim in this work that koinonia and allelous together are a biblical idea and find a way to implement it. A comfortable church size of 200 members with a team of 10 elders and deacons could supply spiritual oversight in small groups if the church and people wanted to. It is workable. The irony in all this is that after 5,000 men came to Christ—many we can assume had families—they found a way to implement koinonia and allellous [Acts 4:4, 32]

Testimony

Revelation 12:11 says “And they overcame him by the blood of the Lamb, and by the word of their testimony; and they loved not their lives unto the death.” We might have misread this verse.

First, the “him” here is the accuser of the brethren. This, in itself, is an inspiring sermon on unity because Satan accusations, his lies, are designed to bring hate and division and “they overcame him.”

Secondly, perhaps, because the word “testimony” is the word “witness” followed by the grace to accept martyrdom, this

Ministry

might have mistakenly been the focus in some sermons. We might had the false picture of a saint of God going quickly to his or her eternal reward like Stephen.

But I think their witness was in their life and verbal testimony. And together with the reality of the Death and Resurrection of the Savior, they presented a power counter-assault against Satan and defeated him.

Some Christians may have substituted James Kennedy's Four Spiritual Laws for their personal testimony, and that is not the force of this verse! [We don't disparage Dr. Kennedy's message.] We overcome because we have personally experienced God's Word alive and active in our lives. We own our faith and we have a message—not a theology. When Satan tempted Jesus in the wilderness, Jesus did not refer to the Word only as a guide for spiritual living or a manual and what to say if asked. Jesus spoke from the depth of His own conscience, His heart, of the principle by which His life and ministry had been built and proven to be right from wrong. He gave Satan His testimony and overcame.

Koinonia is the environment in which we can begin to put into words what God is doing in us and then match this up with Scripture worth memorizing. This will not happen in the cathedral or auditorium or in the sanctuary where all sit in silence. This happens in the company of co-laborers in Christ that befriend each other in dialog and share what the Lord is doing in their lives. Peter's sermon—first ever heard—was his testimony with the message of the Cross—the way to go on the offensive against our true enemy, the devil. That's our testimony, too.

If I may be poetic and maybe in some regard even literal: Just maybe one after another in that small company, as on Pentecost, the flame of a passionate love for God will be ignited again and our testimonies sharpened to prick the hearts of many [Acts 2:37] to draw them to Christ.

The Bond of Love

To the Galatians Paul wrote, “Brethren, you have been called unto liberty; only *use* not liberty for an occasion to the flesh ... [Galatians 5:13]. Paul’s concern for the Galatians is not to be passed over as a mere historical note—as if history could never repeat, when it does, it has, and it will. The Galatians were bewitched [Galatians 3:1] by the Judaizers who may have been trying to persuade the Gentile believers into using Jewish practice [Acts 15:5]. “Bewitched” is an “evil eye.” You know the saying: “if looks could kill.” Not kill ..persuade! “If looks could persuade.” Some people envious of another’s blessing seeking to divest them of it through deception. Today we call it spam, which by definition is: Relentless deceptive messaging meant to redirect people away from truth.

They maintained that all male believers, even Gentiles, must be circumcised to be saved. Paul sought to free them completely from the Jewish Law since their salvation did not depend on these 613 injunctions contained in it. But even though he fought for their freedom in this matter, he admonished them in the matter of their ministry to and *relationship with one another*, they should seek to be *enslaved*. In saying “by love serving one another” [Galatians 5:13] his word for serving meant “to be slaves” to one another.

Paul’s use of this word in the context of talking about our freedom from the Judaic Law implies a relinquishing of that freedom in relationship with other believers for the bond of Christian unity. [Must we always be right!?] As we noted Christian koinonia [fellowship] and Christian unity are inseparable truths: the 2 sides to the same coin.

It is reasonable to say that as servants [slaves] of Jesus Christ, our bond with Him is stronger: our commitment to Him is more an abandonment of our own will for His. But with our brothers and sisters in Christ we are admonished not to seek our own way by seeing ourselves above another. Jesus taught: “You know that those who are considered rulers over the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over

Ministry

them. Yet it shall not be so among you; but whoever desires to become great among you shall be your servant. And whoever of you desires to be first shall be *slave* of all. “ [Mark 10:42-44].

There are as many applications of this admonishment as there are conversations between two Christians. If I could go back and relive some of them I would have been more understanding the second time around. But this is a simple aspect of the allelous principle [our relationship with one another] that has to be learned sometimes by trial and error. This is why we will still want to later discuss another allelous principle: forgiveness.

We must seek to be reasonable, understanding, and empathetic, which should get us part of the way to a servanthood toward one another—the overarching attitude or Christian trait embodied in the Beatitudes.

Submission

“Submitting yourselves one to another” - Ephesians 5:21

Paul began his letter to the church at Rome, “Paul, a *servant* of Jesus Christ, called *to be* an apostle, separated unto the gospel of God,” [Romans 1:1]. There is something very revealing in his statement. His apostleship was not his office but his calling—a distinction worth noting. To see this compare some of the other words used about ministering or serving the Lord.

Ecclesiasticus 4:14 reads, “Those who *serve* wisdom *minister* to the Holy One [God].” There is here a distinction made between serving and ministering.

[For those who must know: Ecclesiasticus was excluded from the Bible by the Jewish Rabbis. Protestant church leaders agreed because no copy has been found in the Hebrew language. But the Catholic Bible has this book.]

Picture two circles: the inner one like a simple bull’s eye and the outer one the target. Now label the inner one *ministering* and the outer circle label *serving*. Everyone who ministers, also serves, but not every one who serves is a minister. Every professional or credentialed minister is said to serve the Lord, but not every service done for the Lord is done by professional ministers.

Paul on occasion spoke of his service to the Lord as a “minister,” someone specifically chosen to do whatever was done [Philippians 3:3; 2 Timothy 1:3; Romans 1:9]. He spoke of the *office* of ministry only in an *administrative* sense when money was collected for the poor, for example, [2 Corinthians 9:12; Romans 15:27] or of Epaphroditus’ sacrificial service on behalf of

Submission

the believers in Philippi [Philippians 2:17, 30]. He also preferred to call himself a “minister” when it designated his ministerial office, which in his thinking was when his life was explained in terms of an Old Testament offering. The NASB reads, “even if I am being poured out as a *drink offering* upon the sacrifice and service of your faith, I rejoice.” [Philippians 2:17].

I know this is a lot to take in, but the point is that a closer examination of Paul’s writing shows that he saw himself only as God’s *slave* using another word for “servant” that speaks to an unconditional and unquestioning submission to God. He never saw himself in an organizational hierarchy or as someone honored by God in some special way. He never wore the collar nor the robe—not because he couldn’t but because it was not significant to his *relationship* with his Lord.

Deacon

If there was an exception, it would have been in addressing the church at Corinth where he opens his second letter not as “a servant called an apostle” but rather “Paul an apostle of Jesus Christ by the will of God.” [2 Corinthians 1:1].

Chapter 3 of 2 Corinthians shows how out of character Paul felt in addressing the Corinthians to get their attention and respect. He had to couch his calling in the language of an “office” but he used the word “deacon.”

Even here, in 2 Corinthians 4:1, he saw his ministry [deaconate] no more worthy of commendation or approbation than of a deacon [the service of those who prepare and present food or administer to the physical needs of others - Romans 12:7]. The modern equivalent in a secular world would be a waiter or waitress. Paul saw himself in such humble service to God. Was this whom Jesus spoke of in Matthew 10:42: “And whosoever shall give to drink unto one of these little ones a cup of cold water only in the name of a disciple, verily I say unto you, he shall in no wise lose his reward.”

Submission

A Servant's Heart

Paul had a servant's heart! If we do not have a servant's heart,, anything we will do will become merely mechanical and spiritually lifeless.

Paul wrote in Philippians 2:5, 7: "Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus: ... [who] made himself of no reputation, and took upon him the form of [in essence] *a servant*...."

Jesus in His humanity displayed a servant's heart. The word "form" in Philippians 2:7 doesn't mean "in appearance" only but intrinsically and essentially, He was God's servant. Paul proceeded to define this change in the Son of God as an emptying of Himself, giving up certain powers and privileges He shared with His Father to become human. If we ask Paul, "Why did He do this?" Paul explained, "He did not think it robbery to be equal with God, His Father." He did not want to trade our salvation to keep His equality with His Father. He did not seek to hold onto the glory if it meant no Cross.

Jesus, teaching in the Temple teaching, said, "He that speaks of himself seeks his own glory: but he that seeks his glory that sent him,, the same is true, and no unrighteousness is in him." [John 7:18].

Just before His crucifixion, He prayed, "O Father, glorify me with your own self with the glory which I had with you before the world was." [John 17:5]. The NASB reads clearer: "Father, glorify Me together with Yourself, with the glory which I had with You before the world existed"

And this mind we are asked to have, Lightfoot adds, "in your hearts" [Philippians 2:5]. One cognate form of the word "mind" here has been called a "knowledge and holy love of the will of God." [Ephesians 1:8]. This is not an isolated or momentary thought. The word "mind" here is a verb "to be mindful" meaning to ponder, resolve, intend, have it always in the fore of you thoughts and on your heart! True ministering by

Submission

all believers is humble obedience to the call of God upon their lives [Luke 6:46].

We should be spiritual bondsmen and women according to Deuteronomy 15:15 and resolve, "Lord, by your grace, I will not go away from you; because I love you and your house [all believers]." As Torah Law reads, "And you shall remember that you were a bondman in the land of Egypt, and the LORD your God redeemed you: therefore I command you this thing to day. And it shall be, if he says to you, I will not go away from you; because he loves you and your house, because he is well with you; Then you shall take an awl, and thrust *it* through his ear unto the door, and he shall be your servant for ever. And also unto your maidservant you shall do likewise." [Deuteronomy 15:15–17].

This is the mind of Christ. This was the Savior's conviction, the life He led in His humanity. "Jesus ... said, My doctrine is not mine, but his that sent me. ... I do nothing of myself; but as my Father hath taught me, I speak these things." [John 7:16; 8:28].

Others Before Self

Without the servant's heart koinonia [fellowship] is not possible. Koinonia is the light that dispels the darkness of greed, deception, and pride [these are attributes of selfishness]. Koinonia is all about allelous [others]; fellowship among believers is all about "one another." There is an emphasis on "ministry to others."

To be following Jesus and to be Spirit led we need a servant's heart. This is almost circular reasoning because to be God's servant means to follow Him!

It is this mindset that wants to be a living sacrifice for God and find His desires for their life pleasing, acceptable and perfect [Romans 12:1-2]. Perhaps, this is why Paul talked about transforming the mind. The analogy we like is the caterpillar becoming the butterfly, though the Ancient Greeks wouldn't

Submission

have used “transformed” in that example not knowing yet the science. Paul spoke of God creating in us brand new and different perspectives and desires where what was once reasonable as self-serving is now unreasonable. Being God’s servant now is the believer’s mindset. You are more important to me than myself. Or, as Paul, explained it to the Philippians, “Look not every man on his own things, but every man *also* on the things of others.” [Philippians 2:4]. “Also” does not mean “in addition to your own.” “Also” is emphatic: “not only your own but *especially* ... others.”

Jesus

If there is a single characteristic that identifies the servant’s heart it would be that Jesus is always center. Someone once said that godliness is living your life with one eye on God [one eye on Jesus]. Koinonia devolves into something harmful to our spiritual edification when the subject is no longer Him.

There is nothing, for example, wrong with support groups for particular problems or addictions where people in the group get to view your worse side in an honest and empathic effort to understand and help one of their number to recover, but this does not koinonia. Koinonia highlights the principle of allelous or what we share in common within an otherwise diverse Christian group and that sole commonality is Jesus.

When Fellowship is around me and my personal needs, Jesus tends to sit in the back row alone while a group of would-be counselors suggest solutions. This is not fellowship; this is not koinonia. Servanthood or a servant’s heart keeps Jesus in the center of every need, every problem and through prayer allows Him to address them.

When collections are made, it is for the poor. It is looking outward to others and not inward to self. The word “koinonia” means a “collection for the poor” because it is a common fund for those in need and not money raised just for “me.” It is grace expressed in Christian love.

Submission

The Spirit

When Jesus is in the center of the room, the group purpose is learning God's Word. A servant-hearted people are not condemning other reasons for assembling, nor is it condemning the larger gathering. What servant's of Jesus Christ are saying is they want a time together where in prayer and with the Spirit's ministry among them they can advance their understanding of the message of Scripture, not only in an academic sense but experientially.

Other gatherings may serve other purposes and many believers join them for other reasons: addictions, financial crises, for social interaction only which is very human. But in all this activity, servant hearts long for that gathering whose sole purpose is through dialog in small groups invite the Spirit to do His thing:

"When he, the Spirit of truth, is come, he will guide you into all truth: for he shall not speak of himself; but whatsoever he shall hear, *that* shall he speak: and he will shew you things to come. He shall glorify me: for he shall receive of mine, and shall shew *it* unto you. All things that the Father hath are mine: therefore said I, that he shall take of mine, and shall shew *it* unto you." [John 15:13-16].

Allelous

Servant with a heart seeking to follow the Lord through His Word will be focused on what is affirmed collectively, not by the majority but by all, which is how the Spirit works. Those who have a heart after God's care about unity and not convincing anyone how right they are.

A servant's heart cherishes the opportunity for the Spirit of God to inspire and share heart to heart. They appreciate the moment when unity can set aside denominational bias, personal opinion, unresolved doctrinal differences, and cultural

Submission

interpretations for a deeper and honest look into Scripture and discover what the Spirit alone will reveal. This is an allelous moment because as the Spirit shares with one, He shares with all.

The Larger Group

Should smaller group gatherings replace the larger gathering on a Sunday Morning? No. The home gatherings or meetings at the river were never intended to replace a prayer meeting in the Temple Court. “They, continuing daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, did eat their meat with gladness and singleness of heart,” [Acts 2:46].

We might be living in a time, however, in which God’s servants want a deeper study into the Word, not one that endorses denomination distinctive or is focused on a particular crisis or highlighting some author’s latest book, but a chance to learn more from *God’s Book*, the Bible, itself! I joined a small men’s group from a church I don’t attend because they want to dialog over the “Text.” The men are selecting books of the Bible not because they were their favorites, let alone easy to follow. We discuss 1 or 2 chapters a week in an hour and a half time and there are moments when The Spirit does not disappoint. This is part of koinonia and a necessary aspect of believer edification and growth.

This makes the larger gathering on a Sunday Morning, or whenever they meet, more dynamic, more inspiring, more important. Instead of hiding in the larger group, it becomes a time to gather with others of like faith—like some day we will around the Throne [Revelation 7:9]. The smaller groups are no longer there to maintain the numbers in the larger group; the larger group now supports the smaller groups where God is doing things He cannot do in the larger group with its time limits, tight schedules, as well as, all that needs to be crammed in an hour or hour and a half “service.” Some churches have back to back services as well.

Submission

Koinonia

But we are talking here not about schedules or congregation size or the many challenges ministries face. We are talking about the heart of the servant of God, who is probably sitting there enjoying what they can get but wanting a lot more. We are talking about the young believer who only knows they are hungry but doesn't know why or how to feed that hunger. We are talking about the servant of God whose heart seeks that deeper walk. Sunday Morning apparently isn't enough, nor do church programs fill them. They need koinonia.

Mutuality

“having the same care one for another [without partiality or favoritism]” - 1 Corinthians 12:25

Koinonia is far more than a Bible Study. We gather to interrelate, to look into each other’s eyes, which share what is often never said but important to say. Person to person, heart to heart, is real and is not replaceable by FaceTime or watching the service on T.V.

In gathering in a smaller group where dialog is encouraged believers create an opportunity to learn about God’s grace as an outreach ministry to other believers and not just an evangelistic message to the lost. They get a chance through allelous [one another] to share of themselves showing that grace is not just something given us by God but something given *to* us to be given *by* us to others. God didn’t create us only to be loved by Him but to be able to love others in turn.

God’s grace, of which His love is an expression, is covenantal and as such it is a mutual love. We do not love another only because they love us back. This would be reciprocal, but grace is *unmerited*. Unmerited love as a form of God’s grace is love offered unconditionally.

Conditional

We don’t want to stray too far from our reason for writing, that is, fellowship with one another [koinonia with allelous], but some Christians reason that God’s love like His mercy cannot be unconditional. “God is not mocked,” Paul reminded us in

Mutuality

Galatians 6:7. He only shows grace and mercy to those who receive it for the right reasons. In modern terms: God is no enabler.

Is it possible that within the circle of believers there are some who are taking advantage of our kindness without any movement closer to spiritual health and well-being? In one town, I pastored, the churches collectively provided a benevolence fund based on a voucher system by which the poor could obtain food at the local market. Some of the seemingly most oppressed of society came regularly without any indication of personal effort to improve their social or economic status. They were caught in the matrix of extreme poverty and, even if unintentionally, we helped them stay there!

A grace that is unconditional is what is now called “extreme grace” or a cheap grace whereby God’s blessings never grow our relationship with Him but offer us only a “Christian” status, a positional salvation, while we await a better life in the next! Is such a thing possible? Is it Biblical?

Cheap Grace

We are arguing in this work that a doctrine that cheapens grace is not covenantal because it is not mutual. The difference between reciprocal and mutual is: reciprocal is each person seeking to *get* something out of the arrangement; mutual is each person seeking to *give* because they are givers. A mutual desire to give unconditionally is in itself healing and not enabling, because everyone in the relationship gives and therefore receives.

Enabling is neither mutual nor reciprocal. It is not reciprocal because there is no exchange. We cannot purchase salvation. Cheap grace, also, would presume a salvation that is not mutual—not relational. This is a misnomer. It is not Biblical!

The Judaizers argued for cheap grace or an enabling grace with Paul who captured the essential point of their argument in Romans 6:1: “Shall we continue in sin, that grace

Mutuality

may abound?" Shall the financially oppressed be allowed to come to the food pantry, and not seek a better life, just because the pantry is there? Does God's grace have a limit? Will the Spirit offer forgiveness only 7 times? Of course not! But when Jesus returns, the age of grace will have come to an end. The pantry remains open and freely offered to those in need, but they who come here should know that someday the town might discontinue it.

Grace remains available even for those who refuse it's true reason God offers it but this is not koinonia because it is not allelous [a mutual caring for one another]. Yet, there is a mutual aspect to God's grace. We are loved to be able to love; we are forgiven to be enabled to forgive [Matthew 6:12].

The Love Feast

The early church, also, needed to understand what koinonia and allelous was all about. Even if it was natural for Christian love, it needed to be taught. The Corinthian Church was a prime example of a church group that lost sight of the essential importance of koinonia when they came together to eat and celebrate the Lord's Supper, called the "love feast." Jude tells us they devolved into "serving only themselves" [Jude 12]. "So then, my brothers and sisters," Paul instructed them, "when you come together to eat [the Lord's Supper], wait for one another and see to it that no one is left out." [1 Corinthians 11:33 AMPLIFIED]. As soon as the allelous principle was discarded, a selfish attitude crept in to destroy koinonia!

Caring

Koinonia thrives on mutuality which we have been defining as a desire among believers to give of themselves for the edification of all. This is the very definition of unmerited grace. Because God's servant is not seeking to get, when they are instruments of God's grace to others, they are *not* focused on personal blessing

Mutuality

even though this is happening. Allelous is grace in action when we minister to “one another” or we fellowship “together.” We are called to love one another in the same manner Jesus loves us [John 13:34]. Nothing shouts “koinonia” more loudly.

Paul taught the Corinthians a profound truth that God has not made us all alike but in some regards vastly different; so that, often in that circle of believers who seek koinonia there are those who are less welcome. We would value them less [probably not miss their absence] except for the fact that God gave them to our group for our edification, as much so as those we consider most important to our collective ministry. “Our comely [members] have no need [of more acclamation]: but God [has brought us] together, having given more abundant [value] to that [person] which lacked.” [1 Corinthians 12:24]. Paul taught that God has put us together. Those who seem least importance or who serve among us in the most menial tasks without any skills, their contribution to the ministry is as meaningful as that of any other.

And then Paul said something, I didn’t expect to read: “That there should be no schism in the body; but that the members should have the same care one for another [without partiality or favoritism]. And whether one member suffer, all the members suffer with it; or one member be honored, all the members rejoice with it. [1 Corinthians 12:25-26].

To prevent division and encourage unity, God gave everyone an important part to play among us. He set us up as a *single* body in a most literal sense, so, when one member suffers, all the members suffer with it. And when one is honored, all rejoice. It is a spontaneous and natural response when we sense we are united in worship and service to the Lord.

The word “suffer” I confess is difficult for me to understand in this context. It is older English for what we might call sympathizing. Koinonia here is a common focus for the benefit of allelous [each other] as we read in verse 25, “the same care for one another.” We may not have the same contribution to offer others because how God uses one is not how He might use

Mutuality

another, but God has one common purpose in all of this to unite us in Christian koinonia.

This is grace because no one's contribution to the whole is any less important than another, and no one is being rewarded or honored above another.

Edification

The larger assembly is represented by rows of silent worshippers instead of a circle dialoging over Scripture, the message is more *ministering* by a selected few trained than the service done by every one for one another. How do these compare when it comes to believer edification and preparation for ministry?

In Ephesians 4:15-16 Paul taught that Christ instituted the fourfold ministry that by "speaking the truth in love, [we] may grow up into him in all things, which is the head, even Christ: from whom the whole body fitly joined together and compacted by that which every joint supplies, according to the effectual working in the measure of every part, makes increase of the body unto the edifying of itself in love."

No part of these verses, this process, which speaks of the believer's edification and growth, is represented in our seating quietly in the larger assembly. The early church in Jerusalem, as we pointed out, met in the Temple for prayer each Sunday, but there was considerable ministry through the week in house ministries, in the smaller groups where it seems more reasonable to look for edification and growth happening. Verse 15 describes spiritual growth and a deepening relation with Christ based on truthful dialog and Christian love: "speaking the truth in love." This speaks of everyday believer interaction. Paul urges us not to pretend or deceive or lie because relationships are only built on trust and trust is built on truth and truth is embraced when shared with love.

But in modern society, Christians seldom relate outside the church. We live in our own social networks that are primarily work and immediate family. To realize the importance of verse

Mutuality

15, we may need more encounters with believers than a single weekend service in a silent assembly.

Then in verse 16 Paul went on to describe every part of the Body [of Christ], every member, you and me and all believers working “energized” by healthy joints, “joined together [the skeleton] and compacted [one body]” the bond that united us, “which every joint supplies ... working” properly. The human body has 205 bones which are interconnected at the joints and ligament [only the hyoid bone isn’t].

But Paul isn’t content to just describe our relationship; he then talks of growth and edification. When Paul spoke of self-edification, was he not saying that this is an automatic process when we take in proper nourishment: in a spiritual sense, love! All of this is an expansion of verse 12 “For the perfecting of the saints [ability to exercise their calling and service] , for the work of the ministry [diaconate, i.e. humble service caring for one another], for the edifying [healthy spiritual growth] of the body of Christ.”

We are not eliminating the larger group. Quite the opposite, we are ascribing to it a greater importance as believers who are use to working together can now worship together with a focus tuned to their service to one another and focused exclusively on their Lord.

Paul’s metaphor of the skeletal system is more generally speaking an analogy of arms and legs connected to the body. I am not sure what he knew about the skeleton. He did know that growth is possible in a healthy body and that being alive meant using arms and legs for doing and moving. In 1 Corinthians 12 he added sight and sound to the functions of the human body, all in a humble effort to metaphorically describe the Body of Christ, you and me, working together, caring about one another, valuing one another’s service to our Lord, and growing spiritually.

“The whole body fitly joined together and compacted” is more descriptive of *koinonia* with *allelous* [fellowship with one another]. In another analogy, we might compare the small group circle dialoging over God’s Word, testifying to His fulfilled

Mutuality

promises, and praying for one another, as the gymnasium where we exercise [Hebrews 5:14]. We are working out, strengthening the joints [our relationships] and our muscles [our ability to serve Christ]. We are developing dexterity, [the skills of loving, forgiving, caring....] And we are coming away more assured and confident of God's calling in us, individually and collectively.

It is a lot to place on a single person, a pastor, when or if God provided this through "body" ministry. Pastors are more coaches or dietitians or counselors or—at times—the paramedic, when things go awry in our fellowships—when we have been trying to lift a weightier truth we are not prepared yet to lift until we grow a little more in Christ; or we have not been feasting on God's message but some secular ideas that are not spiritually healthy for us; or we got off into controversy instead of focusing on the provisions of the Cross; or we are discouraged and about ready to contradict our own hearts by thinking, "this isn't for me" when it is! Yes, we need pastors!

But we need koinonia with allelous. I am hoping these 2 Greek words are beginning to come with their own meanings and need no translation!

Effective Ministry

When we began this chapter, I asked, "Is it possible that within the circle of believers there are some who are taking advantage of our kindness without any movement closer to spiritual health and well-being?"

I am confident this is not possible. Is it possible to eat healthy and still be undernourished and sickly only because you enjoyed the food? Someone said, If it tastes good it isn't good for you" thinking of chips and dip and soda pop—not koinonia!

Since experiencing koinonia means participation, a person who will not participate will leave on their own. Koinonia is a dynamic experience, alive with inspiration and the Spirit's presence, where truth thrives. Anyone wanting to hide in the darkness would not enjoy the sunlight. This isn't a

Mutuality

description of the group finding out something about one of its number that they wanted kept secret. This is a description only of the Spirit speaking to each heart around the circle as He chooses.

Isaiah 55:11 might apply here: "So shall my word be that goeth forth out of my mouth: it shall not return unto me void, but it shall accomplish that which I please, and it shall prosper *in the thing* whereto I sent it."

Truthfulness

“Wherefore putting away lying, speak every man truth with his neighbor: for we are members one of another.” - Ephesians 4:25

Koinonia cannot survive in a medium of deception or lies. Persons who wish to hide from the truth need not apply. No one can read the Bible without being singularly impressed with how much God hates lying. There is no such thing as a little white one with God. A deceitful tongue [Zephaniah 3:13] is the expression of a deceitful heart [Jeremiah 23:26].

Paul called the “old self” a liar by nature when he admonished the Colossians “Lie not one to another, seeing that you have put off the old man with his deeds” [Colossians 3:9]. The implication in this verse is that the “new you” is a truth teller—or ought to be. It is because truthfulness is one of the essential aspects of our character as believers that makes koinonia genuine biblical fellowship.

“All that belongs to ‘deceitful scheming’ [verse 14] and ‘deceitful desires’ [verse 22] is to be left behind. It has no place in the community of Christ. Because our Lord is himself the truth, his body must reflect the truth, because each member belongs to the rest, the fellowship of the church will be marked by a refreshing *openness*.” [Expositors. XI, 65].

Openness

Openness is a general term implying both transparency and the lack of secrecy. But it is not against truth to keep secrets [Matthew 6:6]. Openness, if we want to use this term as a

Truthfulness

synonym for truth, is better defined as honesty, because honesty includes moral virtue and genuineness. May it be said of us what Jesus said of Nathanael, “Behold an Israelite, indeed, in whom is no guile!” Guile is using deceit to entrap or allure—scam—someone into doing or saying what a virtuous christian knows is wrong. We learn defensive mechanisms against persons trying to sell us with partial truth leaving out the details they know we won’t want to hear. [We block their phone numbers, for one.] Sometimes, they cross over into blatant lies; but generally, they can claim they did nothing illegal or unethical, because they “craft” their words carefully to lead you where they know otherwise you would never go. But a lie is still a lie! [This has a lot in common with the evil eye Paul spoke of in Galatians 3:1.]

Lying

Crafty—which is prudent in a good sense—is each thought or statement or each step in a plan, being weighed and measured for purpose and effect to achieve a certain end. In the worse sense, it suggests to me, when it includes deception, an expert chess player playing his game against a young and inexperienced opponent. Genesis 3:1 reads that the serpent was the most subtle [crafty] of all the animals. The snake is noted for its slow and methodical sneaking up on its prey, slithering silently out of sight and mind of its victim. Satan, no doubt, thought, “This snake shall be my voice as I capture the desire of this young woman.” Jesus called Satan: “... a murderer from the beginning, and does not stand in the truth because there is no truth in him. Whenever he speaks he lies, he speaks from his own nature, for he is a liar and the father of [the lie].” [John 8:44 NASB95].

One glorious aspect of heaven is that there will be no concern for this. There might be snakes, but lying in any and all forms will not be allowed in.

Truthfulness

Yeast

So why did Paul address the Ephesians [and in Colossians 3:9] in this way? In all my years of ministry and counseling, I don't recall having to tell someone that lying was not Christian. Then, again, maybe I should have! Paul did not admonish them to speak truth *to* one another in Ephesians 4:25 but speak truth *with* one another. Lies are like yeast, the Bible word, *leaven*, to bread. Our dialog, even over the Word of God, is like kneading conversation instead of bread, spreading that yeast, that idea. The entire group is affected. If we cut our arm we bleed just much as if we cut our leg because our blood is obviously throughout the body. No one would say, "Oh, it's only my arm bleeding out; glad it wasn't my leg."

It is far better to stay quiet than say something we know to be deceptive or half truth just to make us personally look good to the group.

Poison

A mutual idea is often an idea that influences or impacts the entire group and not just the one member who introduced it.

Consider the lie being a form of spiritual poison; we do not know how it will affect the "body" of Christ once it is in our collective thought. Adam accepted Satan's lie from Eve and you know the results—death! This is not an over-the-top comparison between the first couple and believer interaction. Christian community is built on trust and trust is built on truth! When members of the circle are disingenuous about their interest in being in the group, boasting to magnify their own importance, trust is eroded and koinonia is damaged.

Ananias and Sapphira

Remember Ananias and Sapphira, whose hearts Satan filled to lie to the Holy Spirit [Acts 5:3]. This single misstep was not that simple. It was spiritual poison to this young ministry.

Many who read this narrative think it to be spurious because it seems out of character for Peter to be so void of compassion to view their deception worthy of death. I strongly disagree! Some think it is similar to Achan's punishment we read about in Joshua 7 for keeping some of the "spoils" of one battle that should all go to God. The Hebrew has a word for this [CHeReM] translated in Greek "Anathema." Is this what happened to Ananias and his wife? Ananias and Achan had different forms of capital punishment: Achan was stoned, Ananias had a coronary. But was Ananias punished for the same reason as Achan?

Again, I do *not* see them the same. There is a strong contextual indication that this had to do with this infant work of God. Ananias and Sapphira were part of the early church and after their death fear fell on those who heard of the event [Acts 5:11]. In Acts 5:14 we read that "believers were the more added to the Lord, multitudes both of men and women."

It seems exceptional to point out the women separate. I offer a prima-facie reason, that is, the role of women within the church was expanded beyond the local cultural limitations. If Paul were to meet the Samaritan woman at the well [John 4:9], no one would have thought twice about it. Women became more recognized in ministry and in home churches in some capacity within the early church. Eventually Paul would assert: "There is neither male nor female: for you are all one in Christ Jesus." [Galatians 3:28]. As Luke proceeds to tell the account, he continues to refer to the believers as "men and women" in many places [Acts 8:3, 12; 9:2] and of honorable women [Acts 13:50; 16:1, 13; 17:4, 12].

It is reasonable to think that God was protecting a young koinonia against division, and consequently its dissolution,

Truthfulness

which would have happened were many of those early believers to think that Ananias' deception was acceptable with God.

Discovery

But truth is more than honesty, it is also discovery. Together we are learning more about the Lord we serve. David prayed one of my favorite prayers in Psalm 25:4-5 "Shew me thy ways, O LORD; teach me thy paths. Lead me in thy truth, and teach me: for thou art the God of my salvation; on thee do I wait all the day." This is what koinonia is all about: a support network brought together by the Lord to teach all of us how to live God's truth more faithfully and perfectly.

Science is not the only area where knowledge means replacing old ideas with new discoveries. The difference is, here, in koinonia we are maturing spiritually and learning some truths that for us are new while many mature believers have learned them already.

What this might mean is that believers in fellowship must allow one another to grow, to develop a new perspective on life as they grow, to simply change their minds as they learn, and not be held in a defensive posture to something they now want to let go of, if only the group will allow them to do so. Does this make sense?

A Scholar named Fairborne [I think I spelled his name right] wrote a book explaining the Millennium as symbolic of the current age [a-millennialism]. Later in life He wrote that the Millennium will be a thousand years at the end of time [pre-millennialism]. So, he wrote another book titled "Fairborne vs. Fairborne."

I opened this work as a "conversation with myself" to testified to the years of introspection that went into the present work. As I discovered something about me that was true that contradicted what I previous thought about me, I made the correction and I learned. If I had been in a group over this time, a

Truthfulness

close friend would be able to hear me believe something in the present that I spoke against in the past. It was all part of learning and we all need each other's support in the process.

Chuck Smith of Calvary Chapel once confessed that he delayed teaching the parables as a young preacher because he hadn't grown enough in the Lord to understand them. You can identify a seasoned minister who loves God by the inspirational content of his message. It is often in simple language laced with personal testimony and all too short by our watch. But the best part is how it rings true as something learned and not just an exegetical or expository work.

Revelation

These are not hard and fast observations and certainly the young preachers have much God wants said and done—and they have the energy for it. But God's revelation is progressive: it is profitable for "reproof, correction, and instruction." [2Timothy 3:16]. Paul confessed to the Philippian believers, "That I may know him, and the power of his resurrection, and the fellowship of his sufferings, ... Not as though I had already attained, either were already perfect: but I follow after, if that I may apprehend that for which also I am apprehended of Christ Jesus." [Philippians 3:10, 12].

It is not hard to prove that none of us know everything God plans to teach us—even in this life. Nor can we argue that learning is only academic when we understand that knowledge in the language of Scripture is to be experienced as well. The first 15 verses of Peter's second epistle was labeled in the King James version: "Growth in Christian Virtue" in the Blue Letter Bible.

But how important is *koinonia* in this process?

The verse opening this chapter shows Paul admonishing truthfulness but he added a reason "for we are members one of another." [Ephesians 4:25]. Truthfulness is said to be a mutual aspect of our relationship, an aspect of "Body" ministry according to the context [verse 11-13]. We just explained

Truthfulness

“truthfulness” as a ministry to one another in and through Christian fellowship [koinonia].

Part III

What we have been describing is what characterizes *koinonia* in terms of the allelous principle or the believer's relationship to other believers. A gathering that lacks agape love or shows no mutual exchange of serving and being served by each other, or is not genuinely Christ-centered but designed or organized for any other reason—good or bad—is not *koinonia*. If we do not realize the importance of *koinonia* in the life of the church, that its very existence as “The Church,” the Body of Christ, depends on this level of Christian fellowship, we are, even unintentionally, supporting forces that favor its demise. To ignore the signs of a ministry built on something other than *koinonia*—no matter how brilliant the scheme or its success—is to show a disinterest in what God designed for His Church.

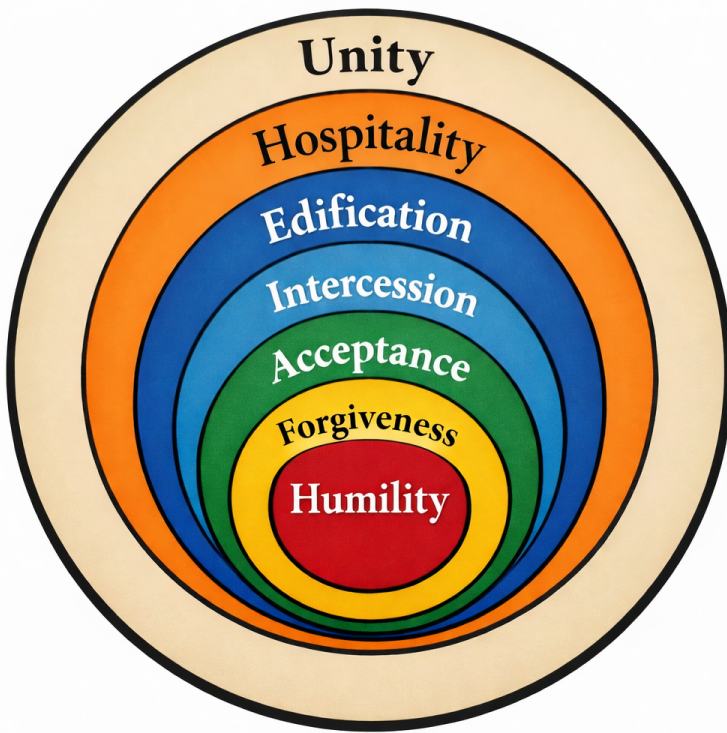
There are 7 traits, as believers, we need to develop as we exercise *koinonia*, 7 traits that will help us refocus on genuine *koinonia*. These all deal scripturally with our relation to one another as Christians and support the reality of our salvation as not just a theology or a religion but a lifestyle that even reveals to us the first glimpse of the heaven that awaits us afterward.

These 7 are not Fruit of the Spirit, though, the Fruit of the Spirit are a necessary resource to help us develop them to have genuine *koinonia* [fellowship] with each other as believers: Humility, Forgiveness, Acceptance, Intercession, Edification, Hospitality, and Unity.

We need to, at times, consciously and prayerfully work toward exercising some of these qualities—not everyone struggles to express the same ones.

Part III

The order in which we study them suggests another “target” diagram in which “Humility” is the center most circle [the bull’s eye] and each succeeding ring or circle in turn embraces everything within it: Forgiveness requires humility, but, in turn, acceptance of others may require forgiveness, etc. Ultimately Christian unity cannot be realized fully without the other 6 traits functioning within Christian community. And the medium [or soil] in which these grow is genuine koinonia.



Humility

“Let nothing be done through strife or vainglory; but in lowliness of mind let each esteem other better than themselves.” - Philippians 2:3

In Paul’s description of Jesus incarnation [Philippians 2:3ff.], he spoke of our having the same humble spirit as the Savior did—a humility by which the Savior valued God’s creation [others] over Himself leading Him—in His ministry—to lay aside His robe of supreme power and don the beggar’s sackcloth of a human existence.

Jesus didn’t come as a grown man, in adult form, which would have sufficed to die in. Unlike the first Adam, He came as an infant in order to enter into the full human experience starting at the beginning: to learn a mother’s love and the need of a Father’s guidance, to discover what tempts a teenager as well as the joy of learning what He did not know.

The writer to the Hebrews likewise tells us this in order—says he—to make Jesus our Brother. “For it became him, for whom *are* all things, and by whom *are* all things, in bringing many sons unto glory,” the writer explained, “to make the captain of their salvation perfect through sufferings. For both he that sanctifies and they who are sanctified *are* all of one: for which cause he is not ashamed to call them brethren,” [Hebrews 2:10-11].

God, the Father, was not content to adopt us alone but to bring us in as siblings of the Savior with full rights as co-heirs of His kingdom. What is called in Philippians 2:3 “lowliness of mind” is now in Hebrews 2:11 “perfect through sufferings.”

Humility

Suffering here is not only the Cross but a lifetime lived in the 30 years before it. To interpret “perfect through sufferings” as His experience in the closing hours of life only would rob the phrase of meaning, He suffered in dying; but to bring Him to perfection—as a mature adult—suffering had to be throughout His life, though unspoken in Scripture yet to which the human experience can readily attest. All this to call us brother and sister! “Jesus is qualified to be our priest and savior because he shares our nature, because he is not some remote being but truly “one of us.” [Expositors, XII, 27].

Definition

Humility is not a Fruit of the Spirit because the Spirit does not supply it ... we do. “Humble *yourselves* in the sight of the Lord, and he shall lift you up.” [James 4:10].

The New Testament word “humility” is itself an essential part of the Gospel; no Greek writer employed it before the Christian era or apart from the influence of Christian writers, afterward. [Trench, XLII, 148]. Perhaps, the best way of defining it or understanding its importance, not just for salvation but, for Christian community and koinonia, we can look 2 other places: One, the neighborhood “humility” lives in, the friends that often accompany humility, and secondly, we can look at the opposite, “pride,” for which much has been written.

In one of our highlighted verses, Philippians 2:9, Paul urges us “in lowliness of mind let each esteem other better than themselves.” This idea is not only an aspect of Christian community but it is central to it! If we imagine the influence of pride in a gathering of believers who are enjoying koinonia but one of them speaks from a heart of pride and not humility, we will very quickly observe that humility is not optional when we come together for fellowship.

Richard Trench began by concluding that humility spoke of a sense of one’s absolute dependence on God, not just for

Humility

salvation from sin or forgiveness, but a sense “of *creatureliness*, of absolute dependence, of having nothing, but receiving all things of God.” [Trench, XLII, 149]. It is here the Beatitudes begin in Matthew 5:3 where Jesus is describing His true follower as “poor in spirit,” i.e. humble. So even if they are materially wealthy when the Savior says to them, “sell all that thou hast, and distribute unto the poor, and thou shalt have treasure in heaven: and come, follow me.” [Luke 18:22], they would be like Matthew testified of himself: “And as Jesus passed ... he saw ... [me], sitting at the receipt of custom: and he saith unto me, “Follow me.” And I arose, and followed him.” [Matthew 9:9].

Friendships

To learn the meaning of humility, since this word is not found in Greek literature before the writing of the New Testament, it is important to simply look at her friends. All these words are feminine gender because they express spiritual qualities. [They have nothing to do specifically with women but with all believers, in general.] The best way to view them is through the use of allegory, something John Bunyan would've done in, for example, like in “Pilgrims Progress.” Let's give them personalities based on their redeeming trait[s] and begin to get an understanding why humility likes to hang out with them and call them friend.

Humility's friends are: “bowels of mercies” [compassion], “kindness” [gentleness], “meekness,” “longsuffering” [patience], “forbearance” and “love,” according to Paul. Study these words and put humility in the center of them realizing that humility is not debating their benevolent natures but embracing them!

- “Put on therefore, as the elect of God, holy and beloved, bowels of mercies, kindness, *humbleness of mind*, meekness, longsuffering” [Colossians 3:12].
- “With all *lowliness* and meekness, with longsuffering, forbearing one another in love.” [Ephesians 4:2].

Humility

Humility exhibits a deep sense of inadequacy with things that are very hard or what we might say are impossible. She is more prone to be openminded about things others readily conclude as fact because her feeling of utter dependence on God allows room for unanswered questions and a few unsolved mysteries in her life. She would probably tell you that she knows that she doesn't know even what she knows because all of life is an ongoing experience in learning and discovering the goodness of God and His faithfulness. She feels that to be closed minded on anything is the same as saying that one knows what God is going to do—and they don't know that! Humility knows herself so well that she will not claim to be able to do something that she knows she needs help with. And her primary source—really, her only source—of help that she depends upon is the Lord himself and persons He brings into her life.

If she were to throw a party for her friends, according to Ephesians 4:2 and Colossians 3:12 probably one of the first to arrive would've been Meekness because Meekness is excited and passionate about the Lord and Meekness knows the Lord is the center of humility's world. Meekness is no maverick, no independent thinker, that would suggest to humility doing something they both together hadn't heard from the Lord to do. Meekness has been nicknamed "Gentleness" because she is at peace in her own heart and conscience about the Lord's will for her. She knows God is always in charge of her life.

I was somewhat surprised initially not to see "Reasonableness" there [2 Corinthians 10:1]. We all see her as the sweetest child of God because she is superior to the rest of us, having come from upper class stock and fame, but you wouldn't know it if you met her. She dresses smart, she doesn't deny her upbringing or post in life. Her sweetness shows up when she meets people who are jealous of her. Humility and she have to be good friends because Reasonableness is a friend of Meekness who is friends with Humility. I didn't see her at first at the party. Reasonableness, Humility told me, was there but she doesn't stand out in the group. Actually she almost looks like a twin sister to Meekness. I think that was why I missed her. Meekness loves to hang out with Humility, as you know, while

Humility

Reasonableness often will engage in conversation with Pride not to win a debate or argue a point but to search for a place where they can come together about everyone's need of the Lord.

Long-suffering and Forbearance were there. At first a thought they were out of place. They specialize in counseling angry and discouraged Christians and at this gathering, there are none. They are a couple of Love's closest friends because they are so supportive of her desire for unity. I think, they came with her. They go everywhere together!

Two other very close friends of Humility are Mercy and Kindness. Mercy has the singular ability to read sadness and hurt in people's eyes. You can't hide from her. She and kindness hang out a lot together because Kindness knows better how to speak encouragement. She is Aaron to Mercy's Moses. Kindness has been nicknamed, "Sweet" and she is, plain and simple. Kindness is also close friends with Long suffering and Forbearance [Romans 2:4] especially if someone needs correction. Kindness never has a harsh word for anyone. She is the Barnabas of the group. I think Mercy sometimes struggles to express concern; Kindness seems to know just what to say. And if some serious correction or chastising words are needed, people listen to Kindness. Forbearance might be more business like telling them, "I'm here when you are ready to repent!" And if one struggles with overcoming temptation, Long-suffering is a friend who will never give up on them!

I am glad we got to meet some of Humility's friends. It helps me see her in a clearer light. The Spirit's opportunity at our fellowship to teach us Christ [Matthew 11:29] will not be there if she's not, and the meeting will prove anything but inspiring!

Goodness

Someone might ask, "Why wasn't Goodness at Humility's party? She is a counselor but some think she is too severe [Romans 15:14; Ephesians 5:9]. She is close friends with Kindness, also nicknamed Gentleness [Galatians 5:22] and Long-suffering but for good reason. After Goodness reads someone the riot act they

Humility

come along with a Christian hug and some encouragement that whoever Goodness just “counseled” might listen to what Goodness had to say.

Well, the simple truth is that Goodness is not a party goer. She’s all business. She led Jesus to cleanse the Temple one day, driving out the money changers. She is now probably somewhere studying the Word in details most of us probably never consider.

While we’re at it, could you introduce me to Pride and her two friends, Arrogance and Boasting. I take it they were not invited to the party we just attended!

Pride

The Old Testament language is very astute. In Psalm 135:3 we read a well known Hebrew word Hallelujah meaning: Praise the LORD. Hallel [Praise] u [you] Jah [Jahwah]. But when this word is in the “reflexive” form meaning to praise one’s self, it means “to boast.” In Proverbs 20:14 A buyer barter over the price of a sale, claiming it worth very little, in order to haggle the price lower. Then after the sale he walks away praising himself, boasting. Self-praise is boasting using the same word which is used to say Hallelujah to the Lord.

“My soul shall make her boast in the LORD: the humble shall hear thereof, and be glad.” [Psalm 34:2]. The humble boast in the Lord, while the proud boast in themselves.

People “boast” in 3 ways: “despiteful, proud, boasters,” [Romans 1:30]

1. Willfully, in action, for which we retain the Greek word: hubris [excessive pride or self-confidence] “*despiteful*.”
 - “Hubris is insolent wrongdoing to others, not out of revenge, or any other motive except the mere pleasure which the infliction of the wrong imparts.” [Trench XXIX, 103].

Humility

- In Acts 14:5 a crowd was agitated by the Jews to treat Paul and Barnabas *despitefully* ... and stone them! [The Apostles fled to another town].
2. Emotionally in their hearts and thoughts known as arrogance and presumption, "*proud*." "A man can show himself [a boaster] only when in company with his fellow-men; but the proper seat of the arrogant and haughty. He that is sick [with] this sin compares himself, it may be secretly or openly, with others, and lifts himself above others, in honor preferring himself; " [Trench, XXIX, 101].
 - "A swollen estimate of his own powers or merits," [Blue Letter Bible].
 - Mark 7:21-22 "from within, out of the heart of men, proceed evil thoughts, .. *pride*....
 3. Verbally, with the mouth, called bragging; "an insulin and empty assurance which trust in its own power and resources. A "*boaster*" is an empty pretender." [Thayer, 25].
 - James 4:16 "But ... you rejoice in your boastings: all such rejoicing is evil."

Presumptuous Sin

The most likely sin of pride among believers is arrogance. As the scriptures defined it, it is a meditative thought, an exaggerated estimation of one's own worth, that we can engage in with our head on the pillow before sleep. Only God might know if we have not shared our thoughts through bragging. "They're goin' miss me when I'm gone!"

It is easy to see the difference between glorifying self and giving God the glory for the good things happening in our lives. The first is pride; the second a humble heart. If we bring this pride into the dialog of a Bible study or a prayer time in

Humility

koinonia fellowship, this attitude will leak out all over the thoughts of others. Christians can spot the pretender.

In Psalm 19:13-14 David asked that the Lord would protect him from his own foolish pride because it was, for David, a willful sin for which the atoning sacrificial animal did not apply. Jesus died for all sins but let us watch the meditations of our hearts and the thoughts we have of our own selves. We too ought to pray, “Keep back thy servant also from presumptuous *sins*; let them not have dominion over me: then shall I be upright, and I shall be innocent from the great transgression. Let the words of my mouth, and the meditation of my heart, be acceptable in thy sight, O LORD, my strength, and my redeemer.”

Arrogance

When members in a Christian fellowship lower their guard—not against another but—against their own thoughts, we begin to express thoughts we will inevitably regret if they are prideful and not giving credit where credit is due—to the Lord.

Arrogance can destroy a fellowship because it blocks the way to other traits that as part of the New person we are in Christ need to find expression from time to time. They are divine “provisions” that can save a fellowship slipping out of koinonia into a mere social gathering, or, worse yet, sadly breaking up against God’s will.

We should look at one such necessary provision, *forgiveness*, which to us is the Balm in Gilead [Jeremiahs 8:22] that can repair broken relations—but only if we humbly accept it.

Forgiveness

“And be ye kind one to another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God for Christ's sake hath forgiven you.” - Ephesians 4:32

There is no forgiveness without humility. And there is no *koinonia* without forgiveness. So, when Paul thought of the allelous principle or Christian relationships, he thought of the need to forgive, admonishing us to “put on therefore, as the elect of God, holy and beloved, ... humbleness of mind, ... forgiving one another, even as Christ forgave [us].” [Colossians 3:12-13].

Forgiveness is a powerful friend. It can melt hardened hearts, disarm a defensive stance, defuse anger, heal relationships. Forgiveness is why we have eternal life.

As believers, our lives should bear witness to a spirit of reconciliation and healed relationships. Forgiveness should be the message of the Cross spoken in every action and every word as a believer.

After spending—it seems like—10 lifetimes as a pastor / teacher alerting the church to its endless history of inflicting pain on the very persons it claimed to love, I have come to the realization that instead of talking about repentance all the time, broken relationships might be better addressed from the other side: *forgiveness*. Instead of scolding offenders, who by their very attitude are less likely to listen, why not talk to the *offended*? Whatever hurt others have supposedly or in reality inflicted on us (the hurt, nevertheless, being real) we all need to learn to forgive.

Forgiveness

I wrote another book on all this, what I referred to as a peaceful meandering through my past, reading, as I go, the monuments marking the battlefield where the conflicts happened. As I went alone through personal history, I puzzled over the meaning of forgiveness and whether or not I had indeed learned to cherish forgiveness for the divine gift it is.

Forgiveness is still the keystone of the entrance into all our relationships from God to family to church to society to even forgiving ourselves.

Let It Go

The best definition for forgiveness in Greek and English is 3 words: *Let it go!* In Hebrew “to forgive” is only spoken of God’s forgiveness. “The image which underlies it,” Trench pointed out, “is that of a releasing, as of a prisoner (Isaiah 61:1), or letting go, as of a debt (Deuteronomy 15:3).” [Trench, Synonyms, XXXIII, 114].

The Greek Old Testament, Dr. Trench informs, “remarkably enough, knows *nothing* of this use of the word, Genesis. 4:13 being the nearest approach to it.” [Ibid].

Dr. Dincalci in his book, *How to Forgive When You Can’t*, defines forgiveness as “...letting go of the physical or emotional debt that you expect to see paid.” [Dincalci, Kindle Locations 846-849]. He wrote that forgiveness “*is not about reconciling if you do not want it.*” [ibid. Kindle Location 627] A renowned author and theologian, Dr. Lewis Smedes, says in his book, *Forgive and Forget: Healing the Hurts We Don’t Deserve*: “You will know that forgiveness has begun when you recall those who hurt you and feel the power to wish them well.” [Ibid. Kindle Locations 898-901] We may even be, in this way, forgive someone deceased or no longer in our lives, because we no longer see an eternal punishment or a purgatorial judgment as necessary on our part. If we stood in judgment over them at the end of time, we would forgive them *then* because we already have *now*.

Forgiveness

But the secular understanding of the power of forgiveness does not require reconciliation, whereas, the Biblical term must consider it, else, God's forgiveness of a sinful mankind would have no power to save. Secular psychology sees forgiveness more as an emotional coping mechanism whereas in Scripture it is a genuine release or freedom from the thought of vengeance or recompense, when possible, through reconciliation.

Dr. Trench added, "every sin must at last either be absolutely forgiven, or adequately avenged; for, as the Russian proverb tells us, 'God has no bad debts.'" [Trench, 118]. An unforgiving spirit in us, puts us in between these two alternatives: forgive or avenge. We will not do the first and cannot do the second. Such an unresolved outlook is harmful to the person with it. The proverb attributed to Buddhist teaching says, "Holding on to anger is like drinking poison and expecting the other person to die." Paul warned the Galatians, "But if you bite and devour one another, take heed that you be not consumed one of another." [Galatians 5:15]. This is one use of the word "allelous" [pone another] we can do without!

"When the Christian Church was forming its terminology, which it did partly by shaping new words [like: humility, love, goodness], but partly by elevating old ones to higher than their previous uses [like: meekness and forgiveness] ... when it was seeking for the adequate expression of ... truth." [Trench, XXXV, 126].

Scars

"I can forgive them, but I will never forget what they did!"

We have heard this before—maybe even said it ourselves. What we probably meant is, "There are scars: memories, fears, hurts, that come with unwelcome feelings that awaken around strangers—especially "churched" people. The battles we have had with other persons—some of them other Christians—have somehow changed us, made us wiser [we think], more selective of whom we call friend, more cautious of

Forgiveness

taking the risk of developing new relationships. All this suggests that we have purchased our own island with “No Trespassing” signs raised to keep the world away.

I won’t rewrite my previous book on forgiveness here but let me share one story from it about the pike, a predatory freshwater fish, and its favorite food, the tench, a smaller fish of the minnow family.

The story goes that Dr. Karl August Möbius, a German zoologist who was a pioneer in the field of marine ecology, put a pike into a tank with its favorite meal, the tench. The tench, however, was out of reach being separated from the pike by a glass partition. The pike was prevented by this glass wall from enjoying his favorite meal. After a number of painful attempts, butting his head against this invisible shield, the pike gave up trying, at which time Möbius removed the glass partition allowing the tench to swim freely about the pike. The pike, hungry as it was, refused to attempt to eat the tench.

Like the pike, I swam now in a tank of christian fellowship but refused to dine on their support and encouragement. Christian dialog had become confrontational; so, although I wanted that dialog, that fellowship, I sat in the church pew quietly disconnected and alone. If social media has taught me anything, it has shown that I am not alone in my aloneness. We need to revive koinonia. We need to revisit Paul’s thought, designed to encourage not scold, and to investigate the power of forgiveness in search of true koinonia.

It is easy to get preachy here but I prefer we look at this as a scriptural enquiry into the value of forgiveness, not a counseling session into what will happen to us if we don’t.

“Scars can be good things!” I began to think. I rescued a childhood poem from a forgotten time for my youngest son, who asked if I still had it. You probably never read it: “Sores” by Douglas Malloch in his work “Come On Home” (Reilly & Lee, Chicago: 1923) page 174.

Forgiveness

Sores

This Johnny Jones he thinks he's smart,
But now I bet I've got the start—
The start of him—I bet that I
Can prove it, too, and that's no lie.
For yesterday I fell downstairs
And bumped myself most ev'rywheres,
And then today I tried to crawl
Through some bob wire, and that ain't all:
Right after I got over that
I tried to play with Mary's cat;
I didn't know she'd scratch or bite.
(The cat, I mean.) She can all right.
I've got a bump behind my ear,
Another lump right over here
Above my eye. And, black and blue
There's seven other places, too.
I'm scratched and skinned: one leg of mine
Six different spots, the other nine.
Well, just a little while ago
This Johnny Jones come over, so
We counted up. You ought to see
How jealous Johnny is of me.
He counted every little sore—
But me, I've got eleven more.

A Badge of Courage

Jesus told us to “Rejoice, and be exceeding glad” [Matthew 5:12] when we confront opposition to our faith. [Or did I misread that?] Is there a context for some hurt that allows us to see it as a badge of courage, like the author’s young boy saw his cuts and bruises in this poem?

Since Jesus associated rewards with persecution in that same verse, Matthew 5:12, “great *is* your reward in heaven” and then He puts us in the company of the Old Testament prophets “so persecuted they the prophets,” implying, at least, that our reward will be comparable their theirs—well—should we, as Peter, phrase the question differently: “Behold, we have forsaken

Forgiveness

all, and followed thee; what shall we have therefore?" [Matthew 19:27].

Jesus, answered him, "every one that hath forsaken houses, or brethren, or sisters, or father, or mother, or wife, or children, or lands, for my name's sake, shall receive an hundredfold, and shall inherit everlasting life." [Matthew 19:29].

So if God were to say, "I'll remove the opposition and confrontation but with it goes my reward," would we decline the offer? Absolutely!

Even though this, alone, is reason enough, if necessary, to cheer us into thinking about forgiveness, there is far more to our reality behind the hardships of this life than merely awaiting the compensations of heaven.

Paul "gloried in tribulation" [Romans 5:3] because he learned something about hardships that gave it a different significance in his experience. Patiently experiencing hardship heightens our understanding of God's love, not only *to* us but *through* us, as well. And that love will rewrite the definition of forgiveness for us.

If I haven't abused the Scripture—and I think not—there is a lot about the Lord, about following Him, about His love which we might never know on the mountain unless we discovered it in the valley, first [Psalm 23:4].

Our faith like spiritual muscles gains mass and definition as the lifting is heavier. Paul affirmed that "Our faith should not stand in the wisdom of men, but in the power of God." [1 Corinthians 2:5]. In 1 Corinthians 2:3 Paul spoke of his own inadequacies, He lived in fear and trembling, a phrase which meant that he gave the Lord's will for his life his undivided attention and focus [2 Corinthians 7:15; Philippians 2:12]. Such a situation might have been on the road to Damascus in his conversion [Acts 9:6].

The worst things become the best things. Professor Barclay called this "the paradox of grace" [Barclay, 115]. As Jeremiah prophesied concerning the New Covenant ratified on the Cross, The Lord promised to "turn our mourning into joy,

Forgiveness

and comfort us, and cause us to rejoice in our sorrow” [Jeremiah 31:13].

Testimonial

Perhaps, this is a different perspective on life that makes forgiveness easier to consider. The memory of yesterday’s trauma becomes today’s promise and tomorrow’s celebration.

Every opportunity to forgive should become part of our testimony to the wisdom and power of God. And it is ultimately this testimony—our testimony—in dialog with the same from other believers that gives koinonia its dynamic and inspiration. This is what separates koinonia from a thousand other social gatherings. It is not without meaning we believe what John wrote applies to us, too: “[We will] overcome [Satan] by the blood of the Lamb [Jesus’ death and resurrection], *and by the word of [our] testimony*” [Revelation 12:11]. Our testimony includes a powerful truth: “We are forgiven and forgive” [Matthew 6:12].

And if that war was with each other, all the more reason for a truce and forgiveness because our common enemy is and has only be Satan [Ephesians 6:12]. Sitting in that circle of forgiveness [both giving and receiving it] we begin to realize one more thing we have in common. We have been through the war—a spiritual war—together. We are veterans! We know what carrying our cross means now! And we know genuine forgiveness both as a recipient and minister.

And should we give all this up for bitterness! Our right in Christ to forgive and be forgiven has opened our mind and hearts to an understanding of God’s Word we did not have before. Forgiveness seems to be the key to decrypting the revelation of Scripture because we made it from Matthew 5:3 all the way to Matthew 5:12 ...and it all makes sense now!

Acceptance

“Wherefore receive ye one another, as Christ also received us to the glory of God” - Romans 15:7

A mutual acceptance may from time to time require forgiveness. “Him that is weak in the faith receive ye, *but* not to doubtful disputations.” [Romans 14:1]. Acceptance means to “grant one access to one’s heart with kindness, into friendship [Thayer, 548]. Perhaps, the best description is in the next few verses: “Let not him that eats despise him that eats not; and let not him which eats not judge him that eats: for God hath received him. Who are you whom judges another man’s servant? to his own master he stands or falls. Yea, he shall be holden up: for God is able to make him stand.” [Romans 14:3-4].

We are asked to accept one another unconditionally “not to doubtful disputations.” Francis Godet taught this meant: to “enter into discussion of opinions.” [Godet, 454.]. Beware the trap! These are debates [over religion] based on reason [and not revelation]. In the New Testament this is always understood in “the service of evil.” [Ibid.] It never leads to a good place in terms of peace and fellowship. “The LORD knows the thoughts [disputes and debates] of the [self] wise, that they are futile” [1 Corinthians 3:20].

Different Words

All of the following verses use different Greek words than the Greek word “to receive” used in Romans 15:7. The following verses are examples of these “different” words. Learning what

Acceptance

acceptance does *not* mean sometimes helps to understand better what it *does* mean. The following reasons are not why we accept another into fellowship. Each verse is an example in the New Testament of its use:

- They were expected to come: Acts 15:3-4 “Paul and Barnabas caused great joy unto all the brethren. And when they were come to Jerusalem, they were received of the church”
- They were guests: James 2:25 Rahab “had received the messengers.”
- They were received because of who they were: Romans 16:1-2 “I commend unto you Phebe our sister, which is a servant of the church which is at Cenchrea: That you receive her in the Lord, as becomes saints.”
- They were scheduled to come: John 14:3 “I [Jesus] will come again, and receive you unto myself.”
- They were there with someone else we wanted: Galatians 2:1 “[Paul] went up again to Jerusalem with Barnabas, and took Titus with [him] also.”
- They were qualified for what our group offers: 2 Corinthians 6:17 “Wherefore come out from among them, and be ye separate, saith the Lord, and touch not the unclean *thing*; and I will receive you”
- They were persuaded by someone else to come: Mark 8:23 “Jesus took the blind man by the hand, and led him out of the town” [Hebrews 8:9].
- They were there specifically to help us: Luke 5:7 “And they beckoned unto their partners, which were in the other ship, that they should come and help them.”

Onesimus

To appreciate the special significance of Paul’s admonition in Romans 15:7 we can take an example from his own life and his relation with Philemon and Philemon’s servant, Onesimus. Paul

Acceptance

uses our word “to receive” or “to accept” about Onesimus to Philemon [12, 17]. “Whom I have sent again: ... receive him, that is, my own heart: ... receive him as myself [as you would me].”

This word for “receive” is most befitting, meaning “to receive into one’s home with kindness. Paul said “his own heart” speaking of the great and deep affection he had for Onesimus, an affection Paul hoped Philemon, too, would share on his return.

Two Compound Words

To appreciate better Paul’s choice of language, it is necessary to understand the force of a word when compounded with another word. I have fun using the word “shut” with various English prepositions all in a single sentence. I pretend that the residence of a retirement home are too noisily assembling in the activity room and I come by to warn them, “Any shut in that refuses to shut up will be shut out of this room and I will shut the program down! This in a comical way illustrates the power of in, up, down, out with a single word “shut” altering the meaning.

In Greek the same idea is common but there are only 2 prepositions, “along side,” and “toward,” we need look at here with the Greek word “to take.” We might think of the English use of in: “to take someone in.” In Greek “toward” actually speaks of being in closer proximity than “along side.” To take someone along side means “to take them into companionship,” which is a close relationship already. This word is used of a groom taking a bride [John 14:3].

But “to take someone toward themselves” is our word here in Philemon and in Romans 15:7, “to take them into ones home, to welcome them into the circle of their friends.” Paul’s mention of his own heart to Philemon befits the idea taking someone into koinonia [Christian fellowship]. Any friend of Jesus is a friend of mine. Our word “receive” is a relational term or implies acceptance into relationship.

Acceptance

Cnidus

In the dictionary I read that “the moon does not have its own light, but *takes* [accepts/receives] it from the sun” [attributed to Eudoxus of Cnidus, a astronomer/mathematician, c. 408–355 BCE], “Takes” is our word meaning “in addition to.” The sun’s reflection off the moon is in an astronomical sense “relational,” that is to say simply, that if the sun didn’t shine neither would the moon. The sun is the moon’s source of light. [Even though Hebrews 1:3 calls Jesus, “The brightness of God’s glory,” this is not the analogy being made here.]

The preposition “toward” used with the word “take” in Romans 15:7, is used in John 1:1 translated “with” [stay with me here] speaking of an intimate communion and fellowship between God and the Word: Jesus and His Father. “Toward” when referencing the relationship between two persons speaks of a profound closeness and mutual interaction between them. Scholars interpret The Logos “with” God as emphasizing a relational dynamism, “face to face with God,” an intimate personal exchange or “in communion with God.”

This is what was meant using Eudoxus’ comment metaphorically [though Eudoxus would probably never have]. But all of this to introduce to us a deeper understanding of Romans 15:7 as not meaning a surface politeness or welcome but a genuine inclusion into *koinonia* of all who come.

The Context

In the context of this verse Paul offered the preacher a lot of material. We should be more apt to accept into fellowship those whose faith is new or still dependent on rituals or “do’s and don’t’s” we have been free of [Verse 1]. And if we must be in some way inconvenienced, we need to resolve to put ourselves last, anyways [Verse 3]. Each of us are here to encourage others’ growth in the Lord [Verse 2]. Once again Paul spoke of having the same perspective, the same passion and focus that Jesus had

Acceptance

when He came to die for our sins. It was all about us and not Himself! We need to be united on this point [Verse 6]. And then he admonished us in our verse Romans 15:7 to take one another *forward* to ourselves as brothers and sisters in Christ.

The Danger

In America, in the name of freedom of speech people are allowed to speak up against that very freedom. Some fraudulent individuals are exploiting the public in the name of freedom of religion. And with freedom of the press and no journalistic integrity unscrupulous individuals are allowed to project a false narrative that alters and controls public perception. In the name of freedom a society is counter-intuitively allowed to take away that freedom. Where are we going with all this?

“Acceptance” in the name of Christian love, like mercy, needs to be “street-wise.” It was Jesus who cautioned, “Behold, I send you forth as sheep in the midst of wolves: be ye therefore wise as serpents, and harmless as doves.” [Matthew 10:16].

Koinonia can be counterfeited by persons good at uninspiring philosophical rhetoric, disputing theology, claiming a scientific knowledge that does not cherish our faith, as well those seeking control though they are not led by the Spirit to do so. And we opened our hearts to them because that is what “acceptance” meant and means! How do we protect ourselves?

John instructed us in his second epistle regarding the truth that Jesus was fully human, “If there come any unto you, and bring not this doctrine, receive him not into *your* house, neither bid him God speed:” [2 John 10]. In his third epistle he warned about someone named, Diotrephes: “ I wrote unto the church: but Diotrephes, who loves to have the preeminence among them ... Wherefore, if I come, I will remember his deeds which he does, prating against us with malicious words: and not content with this, neither does he himself receive the brethren ... Beloved, follow not that which is evil, but that which is good. [3 John 8-11]

Acceptance

Koinonia is fellowship around the Word of God in prayer, study, and testimony in the context of dialog and body ministry. It is important for our spiritual well-being, our edification, growth, and faith. Christian leadership needs to be wise to the dangers and God's people need to support koinonia—if necessary—confronting “head-on” those that would corrupt it, as John wrote of.

Inclusion

Some groups have a sound reason for being exclusive and we would not label them cliquish or closed because their exclusivity is not based on friendship but on ministry or service: Support groups for alcoholics or drug abusers, or those needing help in their marriage—any group addressing a special need, psychological, emotional or physical. Churches divide people into groups also by age or gender. None of these are koinonia, although some koinonia can take place within these other groups. Koinonia can happen, too, during a general assembly in the larger group while everyone sits quietly and takes in the church service, but this service, itself, is not “house to house” or “face to face” ministry [as “acceptance” is defined] represented in Acts 2:46 as koinonia fellowship.

It is a reasonable question, then, to ask whether a believer needs the small group, to feel a sense of belonging in a smaller group, if they attend the larger service regularly where some koinonia can occur. If, for example, they attend an adult Sunday School session in addition to a “main” service, is this not koinonia? Most like, yes, it is, if the Bible is discussed and prayer is included, which is generally true. Do they “need” more than this—say, a midweek gathering?

A person's “need” is a personal matter between them and the Lord. Koinonia is a dynamic spiritual provision and an opportunity for the Spirit of God to interact with each person, individually. God needs to be heard in today's world of many voices including the artificial.

Acceptance

We live in a time in which our faith is attacked [strong word, but appropriate]. Higher education has excluded possible biblical insight into matters now considered evolutionary. An absolute or universal moral code is now thought unrealistic across multiple cultures and religions. Spirituality is a word also describing the use of hallucinatory drugs. A biblical education is now based more on the historical-critical source of the Bible rather than its message. The message of the Cross has been all but removed from the choruses Christians sway and clap to. The message, itself, we can safely observe, has been made simpler and more appealing intellectually. Talk of carrying a cross or persecution is generally not part of the message. The denominational distinctive is assumed correct; there is no “Berean” inquiry into whether or not these things are true [Acts 17:10-11]. The mourners bench or altar rail that was once for prayer is no longer important in Evangelical Church design, but flat screens are. Social media has replaced personal face to face contact and is often taken less seriously or with less devotion than an actual attendance.

What we are saying here is that the smaller group, perhaps, held in a home, strips away the phylacteries, the non-essentials, leaving us alone—as a group—with only our Bible and the Spirit of God to guide. And He will! It is in this dynamic that God may have His greatest opportunity.

One of the most important aspects of *koinonia* is a heightened sense of another believer’s need and an opportune desire to intercede for them in prayer and action. We are not strangers, anymore.

Intercession

“Confess your faults one to another, and pray one for another, that ye may be healed. The effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much.” - James 5:16

My wife’s pastor, in an earlier day, made a hospital visit to a church member who was then in a ward with a couple other patients. After his scheduled visit he turned to the 2 other persons across the room to pray for them when—to everyone’s surprise—he had the opportunity to introduce them to each other. What was unexpected was to learn they both attended the same church—and not a mega church!

One of the greatest benefits of koinonia is having a sense of belonging with others that makes everyone more aware of each other’s needs and a natural desire to intercede in prayer for them. This is never truer than in the Biblical “Home” church. After Peter was released from prison by the angel, “he came to the house of Mary, the mother of John Mark, where many were gathered together praying.” [Acts 12:12].

Fellowship with one another [koinonia and the allelous principle] provided a deeper awareness of the needs represented in the circle and impresses on the believer’s heart to stay available to meet with God on each other’s behalf when He calls on them.

If anything is sacrificed in the larger service it would be the desire to fulfill the law of Christ in carrying another’s burden [Galatians 6:2]. Public prayer for the sick is generally simple and quick or just written near the end of a weekly bulletin. “Burden” here is a word which emphasizes the heaviness of the “load” and

Intercession

not the task, itself. In Galatians 6:5, Paul admonished each one to tend to his own affairs using a different word for “burden” referencing the task, not its size.

Paul recognized that there is a level of sorrow, grief, temptation, weariness, trial, among other aspects of Christian life, that God never intended us to carry alone.

Mourning

“Blessed are they who mourn for they shall be comforted.” Jesus taught [Matthew 5:4]. “Mourning” is a self-contained grief never violent in its manifestation [Thayer, 291]. Richard Trench clarifies that there is a grief “a man may so entertain in the deep of his heart, that there shall be no outward manifestation of it, unless he himself be pleased to reveal it (Romans 9:2).” [Trench, Synonyms, LXV, 238]. But, Trench, tells us this is not our word here in Matthew 5. “Mourning” here is “a [deeper] grief which so takes possession of the whole being that it cannot be hid.” [Ibid]. In Psalm 35:14 the Greek translation defines our word mourning to mean “as one that mourns for his mother.” In the Classics often it was associated with misfortune and unhappy events [something that rings true] but Jesus associated it with our “happiness”!

In 1984 I resigned the pulpit of a small congregation in Western Pennsylvania to become a national secretary/treasurer of the organization I was credentialed with. I remember sitting on the platform after leading the convention in worship and while the General Overseer/Superintendent spoke. I was weeping, missing my small ministry and what it meant to me. Perhaps my family didn’t have the same view of things but there was a part of me that longed for that koinonia as I had known it in many home prayer meetings and Bible studies with some of the saintliest believers I have met over the years. There were countless visits to hospitals in and around Pittsburgh, PA. I would visit and pray with those hospitalized there, some who didn’t attend the little church across the creek that I pastored. I was even privileged to officiate weddings and funerals for

Intercession

another local church during the 2 years they went without a pastor. As hard as funerals were for people you knew and loved, and after hospital calls, even in the early morning hours, there was a part of me that saw this as the most real thing I ever did for God!

If fulfillment is a characteristic of happiness, I may begin to understand what Jesus meant by this Beatitude. I don't think He was describing a comfort that was only eschatological—awaiting us in heaven.

Despair would hide what grace wants joyously known:
So tears are sent from God to wash our eyes,
To see His promise: we are not alone;
A contrite heart our Lord will not despise.
Our tears become a living, healing stream
To cleanse our hearts of what He disapproves,
To free our faith of what things falsely seem,
To learn the special way His Spirit moves.

There is a comfort the Lord gives in this life, also. The word is the verb for Paraclete which is the ministry of the Holy Spirit now [John 14:16]. "The Holy Spirit destined to take the place of Christ with the apostles, to lead them to a deeper knowledge of gospel truth, and to give them the divine strength needed to enable them to undergo trials and persecutions on behalf of the divine Kingdom." [Thayer, 483].

Mourning is still mourning even while we carry the burden of others [2 Corinthians 12:21] but it is not the same for believers as persons who do not know the Lord.

Confession

At its heart, *koinonia* is about holiness and not a simple gathering. It is because the force of evil through dissension, human reasoning, and temptation [will, intellect, and emotion] is so prevalent that we, simply, *need* *allelous*, we need one another. The power of Christian Community is often overlooked both by

Intercession

the individual believer and the church, else we should be more prone to gather during the week for its sake..

James wrote his letter “to the twelve tribes which are scattered abroad” [James 1:1]. The Jewish believers that had left Jerusalem in those early days, according to scholars, were running away from something. Persecution was challenging their faith [1:2-4]. The letter spelled out “divers persecutions [tests] which James taught should lead to endurance not running away.

The rich were oppressing them [5:1-6]; but James pointed out “God chosen the poor of this world rich in faith” [James 2:5]. Their dedication to God’s service was devolving into religious ritual [James 1:22-27; 2:14-26]; their love for one another was strained [James 2:1-13]; and turning to bitterness, envy, strife, pride and lying [James 3:14]. How can koinonia thrive in such a spiritual environment ...and koinonia was the solution!

So when James instructed them to get together, which is what “one another” means, only not just a gathering but with a common and collective interest in praying for each other [James 5:16] was it not to restore koinonia?

We often read James epistle as a theological treatise instead of the instructive letter he intended it to be. Verse 1 calls them scattered. If, as we supposed, out of Jerusalem and throughout Judea and Samaria and maybe farther away, to whom, specifically is this letter sent? Which house church? There were no church buildings yet but they often gathered in the synagogues. If scattered means “splintered” as a body of believers, this epistle becomes descriptive of their plight and not doctrinal. How does James intend to have them “confess ..to one another” as a diaspora?

Putting aside the logistical difficulty of where to mail the letter or to whom [maybe the elders of verse 15 were still in Jerusalem and could round them up] James spoke of “confessing sin” [James 5:16]. Confession is in a real sense a part of a believer’s profession and testimony, which is what makes this aspect of the allelous ministry [ministry to and for one another] so dynamic. There is no doctrine that can replace the personal

Intercession

revelation of what God is doing in the individual heart. This is the power of the Gospel—not in satisfying intellectual curiosity or as a doctrinal belief or theology, but—the ability to write God’s Word on the heart, fulfill within the believer God’s covenantal promise of salvation, making it real. The power of the Gospel is the passion for souls, the attraction to fellowship [koinonia] with other believers, and the desire to minister and be ministered unto.

James taught this truth in, perhaps, the most difficult 2 verses in the Bible for Christian instruction. Confession is a “public” idea, open hearted and not coerced. One thing we do know that it *cannot* mean: Tell everyone all your faults and shortcomings.

Doctrinal

“And the prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise him up. And if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven. *Confess your trespasses to one another, and pray for one another, that you may be healed. The effective fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much.*” [James 5:15-16].

There is a message in James 5:15-16 which is overlooked because it is confrontational if misapplied.

The Catholic church saw something in these verse that led them to build a confessional and give the taste of hearing one’s confession, not to *one another*, which is a mutual confession, but solely to the priesthood. They also saw Jesus’ crucifixion through these verses as a spiritual healing not a punishment or debt erased. If I err not: these verses were mostly applied to the sacrament of “Extreme Unction” known as “The Sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick” formalized after the Second Vatican Council in 1965. In the Eastern Orthodox churches it is called Holy Unction. In both churches it is ministering unto the sick for healing—body and soul. But administered only by priests, not allelous.

Intercession

Some Protestant groups, such as in evangelicalism, retained the concept of a healing experience for the person prayed for but they see it as a physical healing only. A prayer administered with, what they called “the anointing oil” is for physical healing. It is never confused with an altar call for salvation in which “the sinner’s prayer” is repeated instead. There is no confessing of sins here.

If James had not said “confess your faults to one another and pray for one another” there would be nothing more to say. In fact, this verse would not have been included in this work. But now it cannot be excluded!

Repentance

John the Baptist required each person repent which was a confession of sin according to Matthew 3:6. We have understood this to be more general, “I acknowledge I am a sinner in need of salvation.” *Sin* is a generic term to describe the “sinner.” The Greek Dictionary says “When sin is contemplated using [the word used here by James and Matthew] it is regarded as a failing and missing the true end and scope of our lives, which is God.” [Thayer, 240].

In the 5th Century, some Byzantine scribe changed the word in verse 16 to what the King James Version translates as “faults” or trespasses. This suggests that in verse 15 after the elders pray for someone as a sinner they find salvation, whereas, in verse 16 believers are encouraged to recognize the faults that divide us and seek each other’s forgiveness in prayer for the sake of Christian unity. Even if “healing” in verse 16 is a physical healing, we find it a reasonable supposition to say that the healing of broken relationships is a catalyst. Broken relationships may lead to emotional, physical, and spiritual problems.

Intercession

Relations

I asked the computer this question: “Can splintered social relationships lead to physical ailments?”

And here is what I read: “Yes, splintered (fractured, conflicted, or broken) social relationships can contribute to physical ailments, ... , studies also show that ongoing interpersonal conflict, hostility, or toxic dynamics in close relationships (e.g., with family, spouses, or friends) can produce similar harmful effects through chronic stress.”

My wife told me I didn’t have to ask the computer this question because we all knew the answer already!

A similar situation was described by the Savior: “Moreover if thy brother shall trespass against thee, go and tell him his fault between thee and him alone: if he shall hear thee, thou hast gained thy brother.” [Matthew 18:15].

Jesus’ instruction toward forgiveness and reconciliation was not a mutual exchange of repentance as in James’ letter. Jesus spoke of something “between” them not a fault they shared. What Jesus was talking about was not the confession by the offender but the desire of the offended to reconcile.

Matthew 18:15 is not an application of James 5:16 and should not replace James’ instruction in the preacher’s sermon notes—even if James is getting a little too close for comfort!

Carnality

James instructed them to confess “sins.” [James 5:16]. We have to get this right or fellowship will leave a bad taste in our memories and we might end up avoiding the very thing God is calling us to! In a word “sins” were the issue that disrupted koinonia and now, by James’ reckoning, that fellowship needed to be restored through collective confession and prayer.

Intercession

Not to put too fine a point on this pencil we are writing with but let's be blunt: carnality and koinonia do not mix! There is a lot to confess and pray about here!

Paul's word might have been "carnal" which in Galatians 5:19-21 he called "works of the flesh" and to which Christians are susceptible [Romans 7:14; 8:7; 1 Corinthians 3:1]. We fall too easily into

- Dissension arguing theologies leading to hatred, variance [confrontations], emulations [jealousy], wrath [rage], strife, seditions [divisions], envy, [Jesus added, "hate" as a sin of murder, which it is in terms of the Christian relationship]. Paul knew the devil was afoot: 2 Corinthians 2:11 "Lest Satan should get an advantage of us: for we are not ignorant of his devices."
- Human reasoning instead of the simple and clear message of Scripture leading to heresies [opinions that divide], lasciviousness [lawless insolence] and selfish interests. Jesus said it this way: Matthew 16:23 "Get thee behind me, Satan: thou art an offense unto me: for thou savor not the things that be of God, but those that be of men."
- And yielding to temptation leading into adultery, fornication, uncleanness, drunkenness, reveling/rioting, outlandish behavior, witchcraft. The apostle reminded us in James 1:14 that "every man is tempted, when he is drawn away of his own lust, and enticed."

Paul added "and such like" lest we nuance these traits as "not so bad, only human." He also spoke of idolatry, the overarching cause for all other sins. It is not surprising that when God is no longer worshipped as God and the Spirit is not leading, that Christians might act "like a wave of the sea driven with the wind and tossed" [James 1:6]. Not to sound critical but a Sunday Morning concert or a sermon on the good times that are coming will never suffice to remedy are need for a strong faith and commitment to holiness. This is what koinonia was for!

Intercession

Prayer

James encouraged praying “for one another” using a different word for the supplicant than for the elders. There is a different word for the elders’ praying in verse 14. After this, James sited Elijah, the prophet, as a human being like all of us [James 5:17] and the power of his prayers which most likely was a simple illustration of how “the effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much.” Koinonia is prayer *together* and it is “very powerful.”

But why James’ choice of words? Let us walk down an exegetical path that might sound unfamiliar and “prima facie.” Commentaries have not been helping in answering my questions, so I depend upon my heart’s understanding based on study and prayer. This is total disclosure.

In verse 14 when the elders pray they are interceding *for others*; this is not a mutual confession but simply meeting with God on behalf of someone sick who called on them. When they “call” for the elders, they are asking them to talk to God on their behalf regarding their illness. These persons are weak and probably bed-ridden.

In verse 15 the focus is on the sick and not the elders; so, the “prayer of faith” here is a prayer of consecration, a vow honoring and celebrating the covenant between God and them, which on their part is a repentant heart. “If he has committed sins, they will be forgiven.” This is the language of the vow of consecration.

This word for prayer is very Old Testament and Jewish. Prayer for them was not only about something requested of God but an awareness of the supplicant’s commitment to God as well. Prayer is covenantal and relational, as we have noted about fellowship, itself. Prayer is an expression of our “fellowship” with God and this word in a Hebraic sense says it best.

In verse 16 “Pray for one another” is a dynamic construction because it uses this language of the covenant [a vow of consecration] in a mutual commitment to each other and to

Intercession

God—*while* confessing in total agreement, and with as much clarity as possible, the sin or sins that separated them. The commands in the present time for both “confessing” and “praying” suggests there might be a lot to pray about, but for the sake of fellowship—and health—they will plough ahead addressing every issue nothing hidden any longer. This is true revival! And koinonia and allelous play a major role in the Spirit’s opportunity to move among them healing not just bodies but relationships, as well!

Support groups for addictions recognize the complexity of this process depending on how severe the challenge in steps 8 and 9 about making amends. There is much in this program that parallels the Biblical idea in James 5:16, though not identical.

By confessing in James 5:16 we are talking about openness toward each other and not a public microphone! We must be careful to confess to the person with whom we need to see fellowship restored and not to just anyone in general. In the rare possibility that we did something that went public, maybe we need that mic, but let the Spirit decide!

Now we can talk about “edification.”

Edification

“edifying another” - Romans 14:19

We need to be “here” for one another; we call this “support.” And this might be difficult to understand and appreciate in a time as ours where we have outsourced our concern to the professionals—and sometimes, not without reason. What we are saying is that as there are support groups for various addictions, *koinonia* is our support group for spiritual growth. We are not firing the pastor, nor the Christian counselor. We are not saying that a larger assembly in which we sit quietly as a non-participant is somehow not God. Remember the Early Church held prayer meetings in the Temple on Sundays and later moved into the synagogues. But the house church was no fluke of history and, perhaps, we need to revisit this idea.

Paul closed his first letter to a young church in Thessaloniki with this instruction: “Now we exhort you, brethren, warn them that are unruly, comfort the feebleminded, support the weak, be patient toward all men. [1 Thessalonians 5:14]. In today’s politically divided, multi-cultural, and denominationalized world, this idea might be risky. Perhaps, that is why we gave it to the preacher on a Sunday morning to elucidate. But Paul entrusted to a young church the task of knowing the difference between unruly, feeble and weak and how to relate to each.

Edification

Admonishment

Something as simple as his instruction to the believers in Rome to “admonishing one another” [Romans 15:14] required they know what “admonishment” meant. The word in English colloquial might be: “get it in their heads.” The Hebrew has the phrase “Put it in your heart.” [Haggai 1:7 Young’s Literal Translation “Set your heart to your ways.”] Martin Luther understood this to say, “Pay attention to how things are going with you.”

I am not “big” on getting commentary from an artificial computer source but here I read something supporting my thought about this word *admonishing*: “affirming the Roman believers’ ability to correct each other constructively ... It includes warning when necessary, but its default tone is pastoral, formative, and relational—not merely encouraging, and not severe.”

How do we say this in a real ministerial setting when someone needs to hear such an admonishment! Paul found 8 occasions to use it as a warning. He let the Corinthians know [1 Corinthians 4:14] that he wasn’t shaming them but speaking as a father to his sons. He told the Colossians [Colossians 3:16] that we may admonish one another by putting the Psalms to music! To the Thessalonians, he encouraged them to listen to the pastor when he has to say things that need to be said to us [1 Thessalonians 5:12] not as enemies but brothers and sisters in Christ [2 Thessalonians 3:15].

You First

You might begin to see why we reviewed the above aspects of our christian relations [allelous] and koinonia before studying about edification. If we do not grasp the significance of the above 9 expressions of allelous [our ministry to one another] we probably won’t grasp this one! The truth is, however, these are all written indelibly upon our hearts as new borns in Christ and

Edification

it is this knowledge that affirms the reality of our salvation [Jeremiah 31:33-34].

It should be natural for us in Christ to be “kindly affectionate” toward each other [Romans 12:10]. Paul added, “with brotherly love; in honor preferring one another.” He spoke of the love of brothers because that is specifically what “affection” is, an endearing familial relation that puts a greater importance on each other that says, “No! You first, my brother [or sister]!” Paul took this literally. In 1 Corinthians 14:26, for the sake of edification, he addressed this “pentecostal” tendency for everyone to speak at once or have something to say. There is nothing wrong with this; in fact, it is a good thing to be involved, but confusion edifies no one. So what was the solution [1 Corinthians 14:30]? To let the person who interrupts them go first.

Empathy

If we understand these qualities of edification, the next should be super easy and welcomed: “comfort one another” - 1 Thessalonians 4:18]. Inherent in comforting is the ability to have empathy with understanding. At times it is no more than an ear [listening] and a hug. Paul spoke of this as the ability to “Rejoice with them that do rejoice, and weep with them that weep.” [Romans 12:15]. This sounds too subjective to be wise counsel, but as members of the body of Christ we have a connection that is unknown to secular therapy. The Holy Spirit is capable of making—and does make—intercession for us with groaning [quite subjective] which cannot be uttered. And [yet he retains objectivity]. He that searches the hearts knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because he makes intercession for the saints according to the will of God. [Romans 8:26-27].

That’s the secret: “According to the will of God.” I spoke once of one sister in Christ who attended the church I pastored back in the day, Gizella. She lived with one kidney that put her in the hospital because it was needing medical attention. Gizella told me not to be concerned and that I didn’t have to make the

Edification

trip to visit her in the hospital—as I would frequently do for persons who came to the church. It was never one hospital and never just a mile or 2. Gizella knew all this.

But still I found myself awake at 2 AM weeping before the Lord on her behalf when the Lord spoke to my heart, “Go to bed, she will be all right.” The next day visiting the hospital I discovered God was right about her! That was a subjective moment that the Lord brought to an end.

But I remember when I was chosen to be the camp pastor one summer and at 5 AM I was awakened heavily burdened for a young girl at camp, of which I knew nothing, never having met her. But I had a list of the camp counselors and [I cannot recall exactly] maybe one of the women counselors mentioned her to me. At 5AM I was beseeching the Lord tearfully to do whatever He wanted to do for her. I kept reminding the Lord that she was His sheep and He her Shepherd. I repeated that simple prayer countless times over the next hour until the burden lifted. The story circulated later that she had lost her mother 2 weeks earlier and had not cried or expressed any emotion even with counseling. That night she cried her eyes out while her friends gathered around her and God addressed her need. My weeping was objective!

These accounts might be more appropriate under the heading of “Intercessory Prayer” but I tell them here to raise the issue of empathy and subjective or emotional involvement in ministry. Comfort seems rather artificial if it is just advice out of a book. And sometimes comfort is not advice at all. As with intercessory prayer, true comfort takes the comforter out of the equation.

Comfort

Comfort is all about the person we want to comfort and not us, but at the same time, the Spirit may want to use our testimony as an example of faith or hope ... or comfort if we went through similar.

Edification

The word “comfort” in Romans 1:12 is a form of the special term Paraclete in John 14:16 referring to the Holy Spirit coming to be with us while Jesus was away building us a new home. And He often makes His comforting presence known to us in a mutual way. He uses us to comfort each other. If He hasn’t given us something to say, great advice is: Say nothing! Just be there in prayerful listening. Koinonia works because the Holy Spirit *is* involved.

Builders

Paul urged, “Pursue after the things ... wherewith one may edify another.” [Romans 14:19]. What did he mean?

The Greek Dictionary uses the metaphor of building a Temple: “Since individual Christians are like into a building or temple in which God or the Holy Spirit dwells, the erection of which temple will not be completely finished till the return of Christ from heaven, those who, by action, instruction, exhortation, comfort, promote the Christian wisdom of others, and help them to live a corresponding life are regarded as taking part in the erection of that building and hence are said to be builders to promote growth in Christian wisdom, affection, grace, virtue, holiness, blessedness” [Thayer, 440].

To edify one another, then, is to say and do only those things that promote spiritual growth. In Ephesians 4:12 Paul explained, “For the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ.” Edification is found 14 times in the New Testament.

The ultimate goal of koinonia [our fellowship] is to follow the architectural, drawings and as Jude said, “building up ourselves on our most holy faith, praying in the Holy Ghost,” [Jude 20]. Paul and the other Apostles were the architects. “According to the grace of God which is given unto me,” Paul wrote, “as a wise *master builder* [Greek for architect; Paul’s message of grace], I have laid the foundation, and another builds thereon [You and I]. But let every man take heed how he builds

Edification

thereupon.” [1 Corinthians 3:10]. Jesus is the Cornerstone [Matthew 21:42].

“Thou art Peter,” Jesus gave Simon this new named, “and upon this rock I will build my church.” [Matthew 16:18]. Was Jesus first to use the metaphor Paul used? Since the “church” is a gathering or assembly of believers, we, the people, are the building. If “this rock” referred to Peter as his name suggests, Jesus could have been referencing Peter’s apostleship representing the foundational teaching upon godliness is built. “Neither give heed to fables and endless genealogies, which minister questions,” Paul warned, “rather than godly edifying which is in faith.” [1 Timothy 1:4].

- Preaching the Gospel is building: “I strived to preach the gospel, not where Christ was named, lest I should build upon another man’s foundation” [Romans 15:20].
- Loving others in Christ is building: “Knowledge puffs up, but love edifies.” [1 Corinthians 8:1].
- Prophesying is building: “he that prophesies edifies the church” [1 Corinthians 14:4].
- Comforting others is building: “comfort yourselves together, and edify one another” [1 Thessalonians 5:11].
- Living and obeying God’s Word is building: “Whosoever cometh to me, and hears my sayings, and does them, I will shew you to whom he is like: He is like a man which built an house, and dug deep, and laid the foundation on a rock: and when the flood arose, the stream beat vehemently upon that house, and could not shake it: for it was founded upon a rock.” [Luke 6:47-48].

Called

Is it possible that Exodus 35:30-35 could be a type of the work the Holy Spirit does now in the believer, edifying and building us up? Could these verses be more than a period of Israel’s

Edification

history. Could this be what *koinonia* is really all about in the tabernacle that we represent [2 Corinthians 5:1, 4].

30 And Moses said to the children of Israel, "See, the Lord has called by name Bezalel the son of Uri, the son of Hur, of the tribe of Judah; 31 and He has filled him with the Spirit of God, in wisdom and understanding, in knowledge and all manner of workmanship, 32 to design artistic works, to work in gold and silver and bronze, 33 in cutting jewels for setting, in carving wood, and to work in all manner of artistic workmanship.

34 And He has put in his heart the ability to teach, *in* him and Aholiab the son of Ahisamach, of the tribe of Dan. 35 He has filled them with skill to do all manner of work of the engraver and the designer and the tapestry maker, in blue, purple, and scarlet *thread*, and fine linen, and of the weaver—those who do every work and those who design artistic works."

Let me paraphrase: 30 The Spirit said of us, "See, the Lord has called by name each of you; 31 and He has filled you with the Spirit of God, in wisdom and understanding, in knowledge and love, 32 to counsel, to warn, admonish, comfort, 33 in sharing God's word, and to testify to God's faithfulness.

34 And He has put in your hearts the ability to teach. 35 He has filled you with skill to do the work He has called you to within His body the Church."

Hospitality

“Use hospitality one to another without grudging.” - 1 Peter 4:9

Paul taught that a bishop must be “a lover of hospitality” [Titus 1:8; 1 Timothy 3:2]. Peter went further enjoining us to be hospitable toward one another [1 Peter 4:9]. Yet, a closer look at the words Peter used might make us wonder what he meant. In verse 8 he wrote, “Above all, have God’s far reaching love among you for it is all forgiving.” [My interpretation]. That sounds appropriate to say and maybe close the letter on that note.

But then Peter added, “Be hospitable toward one another [allelous] ... without grumbling.” We know these words, though, I had not anticipated seeing them together. Is Peter saying: “Don’t be strangers to one another”?

But we have never thought of calling the persons we have interpersonal relations with [one another] *strangers*! Then I thought: When I get to heaven most—near all—believers there will be strangers to me. The only one who will know everyone will be Jesus!

But, you contend, Peter didn’t mean “a love for strangers” but hospitality toward one another. And that explains why the admonition not to grumble or complain.

What are we reading? Invite other believers into your fellowship, even though, you haven’t been formerly introduced yet? Or maybe: Invite other members of your church to your home for dinner?

Hospitality

Peter then said, a fervent love toward one another [is this being hospitable?] “covers over” a multitude of “sins.” We might have said it in another way: “God’s love among us does not find fault in others.” Or better yet: We cannot continue to find fault with any believer whom we have invited to dinner and found out that they love Jesus, as we do.”

In verse 7 Peter reminded us to get super serious about koinonia because: “The end of all things is at hand: be therefore sober, and watch unto prayer.”

Strangers

Hospitality has been replaced by the modern hotel in our culture, but in the apostles’ day, people expected others to provide lounging when on a long journey. When Jesus spoke of those who were blessed of His Father and who will inherit the Kingdom prepared for them: He explained, “I was a stranger, and you took me in.” [Matthew 25:34-35].

When Paul spoke of love void of any hypocrisy he described it as “distributing to the necessity of saints; given to hospitality” [Romans 12:9, 13]. This has profound significance when we learn how ministry was conducted in those early days of the Church.

When Jesus sent out the 12 to proclaim the coming kingdom of God, He told them not to take money with them. They would be housed along the way by those whose hearts were open to the message. “And into whatsoever city or town you shall enter, enquire who in it is worthy; and there abide till you go thence. And when you come into an house, salute it. He that receives you, receives me, and he that receives me, receives him that sent me.” [Matthew 10:11-14].

John, the beloved apostle, explained in his third epistle [3 John 5-8] what really is happening when we are hospitable to people who love Jesus but whom we are meeting for the first time, perhaps. Let me interpret: “I have no greater joy than to hear that my children walk in truth. Beloved, you have been

Hospitality

faithful ... to strangers, who have borne witness of your love, whom if you bring forward on their journey after a godly sort, you shall do well: Because that for Jesus' name's sake they went forth, taking nothing of the non-believers. We therefore ought to receive them and be hospitable, that we might be fellow helpers [sharers in] the truth [of the Gospel]."

The commentary adds, "hospitality is not a one-way virtue; every Christian is in some way, capable of ministering to others. One of the long-standing misconceptions in church practice is the idea that only one person is to "minister" in the local church. The biblical principal is that all can and should minister in one way or another" [Expositors, XII, 246].

Allelous

Peter's words [1 Peter 4:9], "hospitality one to another," suggest more than a visiting missionary. Hospitality, again, unadorned by context, means "friendship extended to foreigners." A foreigner is a stranger or someone unfamiliar, alien, outside the circle of our group or cultural or way of worship. To accept them without grumbling, as Peter urged, is to accept them not as a foreigner but as a member of the family, a brother and sister in Christ.

If we examine this injunction closer, it becomes obvious to us, that Peter is telling us that in Christ there is no legitimate or reasonable interpretation of the idea of foreign or strange. Differences in language or culture or worship or doctrine need to be understood for what they are "incidental" to the reality we all share in Christ. We should say with Christ, "They who are sanctified are all of one: for which cause we should not be ashamed to call them brethren." [Hebrews 2:11].

Open Door, Open Heart

Why place this particular topic here between edification and unity? It should be obvious about christian unity. Unity is not

Hospitality

complete without hospitality toward the believer who has until now been a stranger to us. Since an open door represents an open heart, it represents the embrace of that heart to all God's children.

Why edification? Through *koinonia* we build up each other's faith. Said metaphorically, we are the Temple of the Holy Spirit and every building has a front door. Ours is open! We might say it this way: The Holy Spirit within us welcomes all believers into our world for fellowship because He is within them, too. He makes the welcome mutual. If we are His temple, we are His home and He does the inviting! [2 Corinthians 6:16; Ephesians 2:21].

If Christian's had been taught to embrace the stranger, who differs only on peripheral doctrinal issues which are logically concluded in support of their faith—much like Paul described in Romans 14:22 but does not controvert that faith—wars raged in defense of denominational distinctiveness might have been avoided. When we cannot welcome the Christian from the church across town into fellowship as equals in Christ, there is no possible way, realistically, we might claim to love an actual enemy!

Filioque

Have you heard about the "Filioque"? This was an addition made in the Nicene creed by the Latin churches which translates "and the Son." It altered the statement on the Holy Spirit "who proceeds from the Father" to "who proceeds from the Father *and the Son*." Perhaps, in part, because there was no joint council convened to vote on this change, the Greek Orthodox Church broke with the Latin Roman Church over a single term. There was no single date to look back on for this division. This addition became a burr under the theological saddle of the Greek speaking Orthodox churches in the East, centered in Constantinople. Every council or synod that broached the subject between 589 and 1204 A.D. added to the tension, until each saw the "other" as heretical rather than brothers in the faith.

Hospitality

This single phrase eventually embodied a deep-seated mutual distrust. It became not anymore just a doctrinal issue but a symbol among the Greek speaking churches in the East of Roman aggression. It seems, no one, was asking, “Why?” Why was this word added? To combat Arianism or the belief the Jesus was not God but a created being. The rift became so visceral that a friendship between the Roman Catholic Church and the Eastern Orthodox Church wouldn’t be repaired in 1965!

In Retrospect

We cannot know how many true believers were influenced by this ongoing feud, enough to take sides; but we can be sure that many were spiritually affected by it. Even today, most true believers of the Lord Jesus Christ are probably not knowledgeable of their church’s doctrine even with discipleship training, written tenets of faith, and weekly sermons or homilies.

What church history—both national and personal—tells us is that we are sharply divided along doctrinal issues—even if we do not know what these are. If nothing more, we are prepared to say that “Our church alone preaches the full gospel,” even if that statement has no validity to it!

Even after discovering that there are genuine believers in the church across town, if we, as children of the same God, converse with one another, it is generally not about our faith in Christ. We remain strangers!

We are divided not only on denominational issues but political as well because we can no longer distinguish our faith from our patriotism. Only in retrospect can we see Satan’s part in all this as the Light of God’s Word illuminates what the enemy of our souls kept secret because we didn’t know he was there!

And even members of the church we attend have become strangers to us over matters of no relevance to the Gospel. There is a story about a church congregation that divided over whether or not to add a steeple on the roof [perhaps, to give it an identity as a church? How ironic!]. The

Hospitality

“steeple-supporters” went across the highway and built a new building identical to the one they left, only with a steeple.

Pastors have been removed, pulpits vacated, over non-moral and non-spiritual issues. One congregation, I recall, discouraged their young pastor, who resigned, over a Christmas wreath in a window! I could go on. We have become strangers to one another because we have sacrificed *koinonia*.

Culture

The Oriental world in the Apostles’ time was culturally collectivist, as opposed to individualist. They were sedentary whereas we are a mobile society. They owned family estates, we build hotels. They walked everywhere and we fly. Poverty then meant no money at all; now, it means we have less than some minimum in savings.

It is hard to build a cultural understanding of hospitality in today’s western world where the focus is on personal achievement, advancement, and significance. In apostolic times the world revolved around the family and the larger family, the society, that shared a common cultural identity. In the Semitic world an authority figure as the head of a household still had veto power. Today, we claim science and logic as our guardians. Weddings that were once arranged are now based on affection and personal choice. In Western society traditions are less noticeable and even less cherished and honored, unlike in Biblical times.

So, what about hospitality? Is that fence around our suburban home with two and a half baths and the small yacht in the driveway, telling a different story?

Come On In

I grew up in a city neighborhood in a home with 4 bedrooms [3 of these closet-size rooms] and one bath, where my parents never locked the front door. Any neighbor could stop in, put on a

Hospitality

pot of coffee if none was already brewing, and stay as long as they liked. Mom and dad took into our home for a short time a family with children until they were diagnosed with tuberculosis and had to leave. Sometime after I left for college [my sister tells me] mom, now widowed, took in another family. These were people we knew.

So, in my first year away at college when I visited “The Browns” in Flemington, New Jersey, I was not surprised to discover I wasn’t the only “stranger” at their dinner table that night. The Browns used their home as an opportunity to show the love of Christ to anyone who found out they were there. There might have been no limit to their generosity and kindness and I don’t think they thought about budgets or the number of chairs that would fit around a table. Their hospitality was measured by the size of their heart.

All Welome

It is only this aspect of allelous [of Christian relations] that invites others into fellowship [koinonia] without regard to criteria or conditions: rich or poor, all nations and peoples, any culture, any legacy, regardless of background or past, men and women.

Up until this moment, we might have been comfortable defining our spirituality in terms of a community that, even unintentionally, was restrictive or exclusive in some way. Up until now, everything we already said about koinonia could have been conveniently self-contained within the closed circle of those we have called friend and with whom we have grown comfortable. Up until now, no one dare join us that isn’t of the same “faith” or who doesn’t know the doctrinal meaning of theological terms we banter about proudly displaying our knowledge of truth and Christianity.

But here comes one who is a stranger—not to Christ, but to us! They are not here to challenge our faith but in support of

Hospitality

it. They have not come as Diotrephes [3 John 9] to disrupt or seek attention. They seek honest koinonia and they know what it is they seek.

Home Churches

In Acts 2:46 Luke recorded, “And they, continuing daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, did eat their meat with gladness and singleness of heart,” These are the ones in verse 42 who “continued stedfast in the apostles’ doctrine and fellowship [koinonia], and in breaking of bread, and in prayers.”

But who are they?

According to verse 41 “they that gladly received his [Peter’s] word [message] were baptized: and the same day there were added *unto them* about three thousand souls.”

Accordingly to this text: three thousand in attendance at Pentecost heard Peter’s call for repentance and were water baptized. They thereupon continued meeting on a regular basis—actually “daily”— in each others’ homes, eating meals together, studying the word of God together and praying for one another. On Sundays they would gather in the larger group in the Temple court to pray.

Does anyone honestly contend that there were no “strangers” in this gathering of peoples, according to verse 9-11: “Parthians, and Medes, and Elamites, and the dwellers in Mesopotamia, and in Judaea, and Cappadocia, in Pontus, and Asia, Phrygia, and Pamphylia, in Egypt, and in the parts of Libya about Cyrene, and *strangers* [foreign resident] of Rome, Jews and proselytes, Cretes and Arabians,” who testified of “the wonderful works of God”!

Some organization would be required to oversee the care of all widows [Acts 6:1]. And Paul designated qualified elders to oversee each group [house ministry]. Deacons were needed as well, as we learn in the Pastoral Epistles.

Hospitality

Some went further by scrutinizing Paul's message. Luke says they were of nobler disposition, persons who learned to study for themselves and verify what was being proclaimed. They weren't skeptical because they listened eagerly [Acts 17:11] but they weren't gullible either. They were in a position to research Paul's message and publicly discredit it if it didn't ring true. In the spirit of an investigative work the noble Bereans could search through documents and interview those who followed Paul's teachings and confirm that it was all real. But best of all, they knew from their own experience and their own eagerness of heart that it was all true. The only churches were home ministries, or a baptismal service at the riverbank. And they were, the Scripture says in Acts 2:46 "continuing daily with one accord."

Unity

“same mind one toward another” - Romans 12:16

There can be no unity unless the Spirit of God provides it and the Spirit of God promotes only the Work of Christ. Jesus described His work as guidance into all truth, not some truth, and that truth was further defined as glorifying Christ, only.

“Howbeit when he, the Spirit of truth, is come, he will guide you into all truth: for he shall not speak of himself; but whatsoever he shall hear, *that* shall he speak: and he will shew you things to come. He shall glorify me: for he shall receive of mine, and shall shew *it* unto you. All things that the Father hath are mine: therefore said I, that he shall take of mine, and shall shew *it* unto you.” [John 16:13-15].

Christ’s work from His creative genius [John 1:3, 10] to His suretyship [Hebrews 7:22] and mediation [1 Timothy 2:5] now at the Father’s right hand, should be the core of Christian doctrine that should bind us together.

Likeminded

Romans 5:15 says, “Now the God of patience [endurance] and consolation [comfort] grant you to be likeminded one toward another according to Christ Jesus.”

- **Patience:** Why should Paul reference patience and comfort? As a God of patience, does Paul mean, God is patient with us or God is the source of *our* patience ...or both? Patience, here, is not tolerance with others but

Unity

endurance under persecution or through trials. Jesus urged, “In your patience possess ye your souls.” [Luke 21:19] and Paul added, “To them who by patient continuance in well doing seek immortality, [they will be rewarded with] eternal life:” [Romans 2:7].

- **Consolation:** And what about consolation? This is a poor word to describe what Paul was saying. In English “the consolation price” is often in recognition of effort without achievement. Consolation acknowledges suffering without aide or any effort to assuage it. This is not the word here! Here consolation is “comfort” and this is the ministry of the “Comforter,” The Holy Spirit [John 16:7]. This word speaks to His ministry from comfort to admonition not solely as corrective and never as a reprimand, but to guide us for our own benefit.
- **Likeminded:** What we are mindful of as important, as unifying, what we care about, cherish, what we live for—these—are the churning thoughts in both the mind and heart. “Like” doesn’t mean similar but the *same*. The same thoughts should preoccupy all believers. On this basis they can readily relate, empathize, and enjoy fellowship together. Only one thought fits this description and our testimony: “Christ in us the hope of Glory” [Colossians 1:27].
 - Why should Paul reference here the Spirit’s guidance [“Comfort and admonition”] and God’s empowering us to remain true to Him [patience in trials]? The Spirit’s leadership and our resolute determination to follow Him to the end are the context in which likemindedness in Christ has meaning. These are the secrets to Christian unity.”
 - In Romans 12:3 Paul defined what he meant by “likemindedness” by teaching us what it isn’t: “not to think of yourself more highly than you ought to think; but to think soberly, according as God has called you to serve Him.” And in verse

Unity

16 he added “Be not wise in your own conceits.” [Romans 12:16]. “Be not wise in your own eyes: fear the LORD, and depart from evil.” [Proverbs 3:7]. Understanding this is the key to unity and harmony among believers. Likemindedness is not the same style of worship, not the same interpretation of all scriptures, but a common cherished understanding of Christ’s death and resurrection [1 Corinthians 2:2] and a passionate desire to magnify *Him*, not doctrinal differences, not the importance of rituals, and not self.

- **One toward another:** means in our relations with each other, which goes beyond just when we meet in a general gathering but at all times—in our fellowship, in our thoughts, in our relating with each other, in dialog over each other, in prayer. “Another” is *allelous*, our term of relationship and not just conversation.
- **According to Christ Jesus:** not according to the church or the denomination or the government ... but according to Jesus, who sent the Spirit as our guide!

Irenica

Unity among all believers is an apostolic admonition which only the Spirit of God can make a reality. Perhaps the earliest need to heal divisions within the Body of Christ was addressed in a letter compiled and agreed to at the Council of Jerusalem in Acts 15:8,9, 28, 29: “The Holy Spirit, as he did unto us [Jews] ... [He] put no difference between us and them [the Gentile believers in Antioch] , purifying their hearts [also] by faith. ... For it seemed good to the Holy Spirit, and to us, to lay upon you [believers in Antioch] no greater burden than these necessary things; That you abstain from meats offered to idols, and from blood, and from things strangled, and from fornication: from which if you keep yourselves, you will do well.”

We could call this the first Irenicum. Irenica [coming from the Greek word for ‘peace’] were proposals through church

Unity

history aimed at unity among various denominations and reconciliation within denomination factions designed to encourage peace despite theological differences.

The term "Irenicum" was explicitly used since the Reformation regarding splits within Protestantism: Divisions between Lutherans and Calvinists, also Anglican and Puritan tensions. These, and the like, prompted calls for church unity without necessitating doctrinal compromise.

According to Romans 14:22, such peace among believers should be possible. Paul never accepted division. He proclaimed, "Endeavoring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body, and one Spirit, even as you are called in one hope of your calling; One Lord, one faith, one baptism, One God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in you all." [Ephesians 4:3-5].

Jesus' Prayer

Everyone knows Jesus' priestly prayer in John 17. He prayed in verse 21 that "they [we] all may be one; as You, Father, art in me, and I in You, that they also may be one in us: that the world may believe that You sent me." Think of that! Jesus didn't pray for our unity for our benefit for the *world's*! We overheard Him imply—if we interpret Him correctly—that our lack of unity discredits our message. If we don't live it, why expect anyone else to?

But now I recommend, if necessary, revisiting the various aspects of *allelous* from *Love* to *Hospitality* and, in retrospect, see where the train was derailed. Maybe we were content with a weekly gathering for a personal blessing and gave no serious thought to *koinonia*. Maybe we thought our relationship with God is personal and has no connection to anyone else. How wrong we were!

Maybe "Peace with God" meant only salvation or one's position in Christ and never "harmony" among believers. Or maybe, we felt alone, hurt, isolated, neglected—no one cares

Unity

anymore about fellowship. And the small, voice of God still reminding us, “I have left me seven thousand in Israel, all the knees which have not bowed unto Baal,” [1 Kings 19:18]. This was Elijah but was James thinking of us, instead, reminding us that we are like the prophet? [James 5:17].

This was never meant as a sermon, let alone, a rebuke. It was meant as a study in Koinonia and the Allelous principle. It was meant to point out how needful we are, as believers, of each other’s fellowship and support to live for Christ in these last days.

Controversy

But as reasonable as koinonia and allelous sounds it is not without controversy. They say it takes miles of water to turn around an aircraft carrier and I know that there is no way to stop a moving train quickly. When a jet airplane lands, it must begin its descent miles out from the airport.

If koinonia is not already a part of our Christian culture, how can God's people be encouraged to embrace it—if necessary, gradually or in part or on some level, which parallels the Biblical Christian culture? Even if, we see the “one another” verses separately rather than logically connected, how do we make them real to us, if they aren't already? Or should we contend that the New Testament was only a beginning and the Church has outgrown the childish ways of early believers?

And what about governments—church governments? Are these reasonable expressions of Biblical truth but more complex because the simplicity of a Jerusalem gathering cannot be sustained on a global scale otherwise?

Leadership

Over the years of pastoring and teaching I have found that there is nothing in koinonia that Christians dislike. The exceptions have been in church leadership. All of the following arguments have been personally offered to me as reasons we should not place the emphasis on koinonia—they believed—to the detriment of the current ministry:

- Sunday Morning is for worship.

Controversy

- Sunday Morning as an important service readily utilizes pastoral ministry to all at once without over burdening church leadership.
- A pastor can provide koinonia without the need for smaller groups.
- All church functions should be in the Church, not elsewhere, for centralization of worship and to identify the source of the ministry.
- Discipleship as the promotion of Church doctrine, an important part of Bible study, is better identified and associated with the church while in the church.
- A focus on fellowship dilutes the importance of denominational distinctiveness.
- Koinonia is psychological in scope [life and conduct] and not theological [doctrinal].
- We lack a sufficient number of persons to head up koinonia in small groups to lead them.
- Koinonia could de-emphasize the importance of Sunday Morning.
- We already have small groups: AA, Young Married, New Members, Young Parents, Budgeting Finances, etc.
- Its not constitutional and opposes national regulations and church governing documents.
- It will discourage united attendance in the larger group, impacting giving.
- Church leaders will not be able to oversee all groups adequately.
- It is a drastic change!

Aside from the negative impact they believe on the regular church program, smaller groups in a bible based koinonia with allelous ministries would be run by untrained individuals creating an entirely new set of problems:

- Bible studies may raise unresolvable theological questions.

Controversy

- Arguments over moral or political issues may remain unresolved within the group and produce tension.
- Confusion over church doctrines may be raised in the course of study.
- Groups may be reduced to closed friendships that inevitably emphasize other reasons to meet.
- Prayer meetings may degenerate into gossip sessions.
- A charismatic personality may end up leading the group into error.

It is not the purpose in writing to argue these points which should be evident to most church people. If anything in this book captivates anyone's attention as admissible in ministry, they can argue its validity. To say that God's people are not capable of rich fellowship, *koinonia*, is to argue that God has not called into service sufficient leaders to oversee it and God has led us, His people, away from the idea behind it.

It seems easier, in a general sense, to become cessationist or dispensation, dismiss the Biblical record and the Epistles as an historical footnote, and reform the Church after whatever we want to make it. If revival or reform means God's people gathering for worship or prayer or to share amongst themselves the good things God is doing among them, without the blessing of church leadership, will the church cease to exist? If God's people are finding rich fellowship with others within other congregations healing as well as inspiring, how might this threaten a church that has had to survive in this time of media influence, T.V. personalities, and the assault intellectualism is making on our faith. These smaller gatherings might be the very reason the church remains vibrant as a moral influence and a witness for truth!

The Challenge

My hope in writing this is to support a theory that the early church needed no cultural accouterments, no further development, no human discovery or inventiveness, to perfect it. The historical changes—many which came because persecution had ended [not begun] by a Roman emperor whose interest was his government [not God's] were not providential but rather more like Israel of old who asked Samuel to “make us a king to judge us like all the nations.” [1 Samuel 8:5]. First and foremost, even Christians, are religious beings who favor concrete and visible forms of worship; so, not without reason, some form of ritual was understandable even within the Christian church, like the sacrificial “types” Moses received on Sinai that represent Christ and His death.

But, notwithstanding, Jesus said “The hour will come, when you shall neither in this mountain, nor yet at Jerusalem, worship the Father ...The true worshippers shall worship the Father in spirit and in truth: for the Father seeks such to worship him.” [John 4:21, 23]. Perhaps, this is why there is no religious “form” recommended in the New Testament, no ritual, no prescribed order of service, nothing to give credence to the Spirit's presence and movement other than a heart after God that sensed Him.

The Institutional Church is not under assault here. Rather, the Biblical model practiced in smaller circles, “house-churches” [as they are called] was designed, we believe by God to revive it!

The Church

In the 1970's and 80's Evangelical Churches were experiencing a renewal that saw, in some cases, ballooning numerical growth. Perhaps, on the heels of that burst of "spiritual" enthusiasm, which we may credit to God, Christian Colleges and Universities along with growing ministries utilized social science, such as demographic studies and cultural identifiers, to encourage numeric growth by making attenders feel more welcome. Church sermons also became less demanding in tone regarding repentance, less accusatory regarding sin. The idea took off when social media became available.

OpenAI wrote, "The internet really accelerated megachurch growth by providing unprecedented access to global audiences, enabling remote streaming, data analytics, and demographic targeting on a scale never seen before."

Donald McGavran, missionary to India and a famous missiologist [the study of effectively planting mission churches in foreign countries], is widely regarded as the founder of the modern Church Growth Movement. He emphasized empirical observation [science], demographics [people studies: age, class status, etc.], and sociological analysis in mission strategy. His work shaped an entire generation of missiologists promoting several McGavran-like assumptions: attention to the cultural to comply where possible, the use of statistical data to find what people care about, emphasis on church planting strategies, and measurable results, charts that prove numerical and financial increase. As scientific as this sounds, in effect, the old idea that

The Church

the “Gospel transcends culture [it does not compromise with it]” was never consulted.

In joining the staff at Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena, California, he brought his ideas to home missions. Together with the popularity of Rick Warren’s book, “The Purpose Driven Life,” the Western world was ready to try something new and exciting. Warren was out of San Jose, California. How strangely co-incidental that the mega-church movement could be traced back to California!

Churches were encouraged to become seeker-friendly. They would add or subtract, from a weekly service, elements that, in the first case, supported, and in the latter, hindered, numerical church growth. Organs were replaced with synthesizers and guitars. The song book was replaced with modern choruses because these were easier to play—and were increasingly popular because of CCLI companies [Christian Copyright Licensing International] such as: Hillsong, Bethel Music and Elevation Worship.

Anything added was more likely to be culturally supportable. Chairs replaced pews, overhead flat screens replaced hand held Bibles while lights were dimmed, accordingly. Some, sadly, argued that a church experience began to feel more like a concert.

The culture was more prepared than we may realize. Old hymns which promoted Christian theology, which put the Creed to music, like the Psalms of old, and which were honored through choir voices, were no longer sung. Such changes seemed appropriate for the changing times, but some are rethinking the value of those hymns now missed.

The minimalist trend in music, that is, simple praise choruses, some of questionable Biblical value, were now coupled with a general interest in “dumbing down” as far as biblical teaching went. Sermons became light and airy instead of theologically heavy requiring serious thought. Wearing apparel became more relaxed, from flip-flops to shorts and yes, they did, in some places, meet in a barn.

The Church

Sermons became less critical of moral misbehavior by not broaching the subject. They become more sympathetic to cultural norms, like divorce among Christian ministers—not just couples in general [not to speak of abortion, homosexuality, and gender identity concerns]. More and more congregants approved cultural moral and ethical standards as they evolved, irrespective of any Biblical study. J. Vernon McGee preached a radio sermon in 1967 "Why the Gospel is Not Preached Today" [BibleBusDepot.com].

Pastors who were uneasy in all this, perhaps because they needed time to adjust or perhaps because they objected (maybe, on Biblical grounds) were viewed as men of no vision or simply incompetent.

To maintain church growth relationships were encouraged through "cell" group participation which replaced the midweek Bible study. Support groups for addictions, struggling marriages, men and women separately, and the like, were provided, which didn't always incorporate biblical teaching. The Biblical view was often seen as "old" culture. Discipleship training was provided in support of denominational distinctiveness.

Cell groups were organized in support of the Sunday morning "mega" gathering because they fostered friendships among parishioners, something recognized as a key factor in social stability and maintaining church attendance.

By some sources we are now led to believe this approach has "run its course" and for both public and private reasons in the Western world many are now exiting. Christians are not only leaving the mega churches but far smaller congregations, as well, which suggests that something significant [sine-quo-non] within Christendom broke and social science could not fix it! Maybe, it's time to get back to the Bible, instead!

The Biblical model begins with small non-specific groups whose focus was on Christ. These groups were home churches [mini-churches] in Scripture which gathered together as one large congregation on Sundays in the Temple Court for prayer. The larger service was there to support the smaller home

The Church

ministries not vice versa. A Sunday morning gathering provided a blessed time of praise for those who through the week have been ministering unto one another. Relational needs were met in the smaller group—not the general assembly. This brought together believers who had been ministering to one another to drink in the sermon and celebrate the goodness of God together by just being there.

Seasoned cooks add salt to food in the cooking process and not after the food is cooked. In home churches the believers ministered to one another throughout the week and only on Sundays did they gather to receive what the collective ministry provided, which has always been substantial. This pattern is even visible in macrocosm: The blessings of this life, according to Jesus' Mountain sermon, are a consequence of spiritual poverty, mourning, showing mercy, living a holy life, living in harmony with each other, and enduring ridicule and other forms of persecution. Someday we will join that innumerable gathering around the Throne.

For the sake of the pottage of numerical growth, the modern church sold its birthright to serve and minister to one another across cultures, classes, genders, races, and—yes—doctrinal differences. We have restricted our opportunities to serve others by relegating such service to professionals, by imposing requirements on service that disqualifies the very persons God is calling.

I recall a Princeton graduate, then, in his 70's. and having set aside his grammar books and commentaries to simply enjoy watching the youth ministering to one another in prayer, evangelism, and the like. He told the story of a young convert who wanted to profess the message of His Savior on the town hall steps—unmindful of regulations and admin approval. His pastor advised against his going when this former Princeton scholar—true to form—spoke up, "Out of your inner most being will flow rivers of living water; Brother, Let the river flow!!"

The Church

Home Ministry

What did home churches in the Bible represent? Were they nothing more than a humble beginning? When Church leadership saw them only in an historical light, they no longer represented a divine architectural design. Homes became only a necessary meeting place since there were no church buildings. It appeared more like a chaotic beginning motivated by the excitement of a miraculous event. History did not see God in the use of home churches.

The earliest use of a building exclusively for worship dates back to 232 AD in the city of Dura-Europos, located along the banks of the Euphrates River in eastern Syria. Ingeniously, someone envisioned a meeting room where the living room was and they converted, what might have been a bedroom in a modern home, into a baptistry. It was a simple design architecturally, but a dynamic one spiritually.

Houses today are converted into dentist offices, real estate agencies and attorney businesses, etc. Before the third century, there is no clear archaeological evidence of dedicated church buildings, as Christians met discreetly in homes amid periodic persecution. Large public basilicas only became common after the persecution ended in the 4th century and Christianity became a state religion. [Maybe that was the problem!]

The writer to the Hebrews in this regard [Hebrews 3:6] said something profound worth mentioning: “Christ is ... over his own house; whose house are we...” The physical building is unimportant though mistakenly we may have put far more value in it than is biblically warranted. The value is in *us*, the believers. Home churches without knowing it supported this proper emphasis, first, by meeting the only place they could out of necessity [no buildings were yet built for this purpose] and, more importantly, the people ministered to one another [what I call the Biblical principle of “one another”]. They were not simply observers but faithful participants in what God was doing among them.

The Church

What If

Whereas Paul said God chose the foolish [in man's eyes] to confound the wise [in their own eyes], man's idea is to choose educated and qualified persons to control the ignorant. To allow a congregation of only a couple hundred to meet in smaller groups of no more than 20 during the week to dialog over the Word and share testimonies, possibly over a meal with communion [just 10 groups, if the math is correct] still seems risky to those in authority who have the building, its upkeep and mortgage, with which to concern themselves.

What if the responsibility of maintaining property didn't exist. What if the edifice on which were spent 6 or 7 figures to build was not ours, and what if, in the Biblical pattern, collections were made for the poor, and as needed in natural disasters [like the famines mentioned in the Bible]. What if support for missions, home and abroad, could include today's "pastor" full time visiting the "home" groups on a, kind of, circuit, more than one a week because the groups meet on different days through the week. What if the church didn't need government approval for tax purposes because no one cared about tax breaks. What if monthly group leaders, which we may call, elders, met to compare notes and pray for the work. The elders also might meet for further biblical training offered by the pastor.

And here is a crazy idea: The "home" church, we can call it, could meet today in a hotel conference room, a house, an empty office or building, ... or a barn! We do this now for startup ministries. Let's just not outgrow our humble beginning. One building large enough to accommodate everyone could be designated, if necessary, by more than one local ministry, pastorate, whereby their respective congregations could meet monthly on a Saturday or Sunday or some other day—sharing the space. Some smaller church groups do this now in the larger churches.

The Church

Revealing Sin

In Matthew 18 Jesus seems to deal with a number of issues: greed, offenses, sinning, discipline, and ultimately, forgiveness—all of which can be and should be addressed in body ministry. We know this because Jesus concludes with a general promise: if you gather “in my name” I’ll join you’ I’ll be there to show you the way through [Matthew 18:20].

This is the serious side of spiritual support. Support would not be needed if matters of this sort never existed. But what about the many issues that God’s Word does not address: gender dysphoria, same sex marriage, abortions, gambling, over-eating, smoking, and more. In fact, man is capable of inventing many ingenious ways of doing things that God would disapprove of. Was not that the issue at the Tower of Babel? What’s wrong with building a tower? Maybe nothing! But God’s concern went deeper: “every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually. ... this they begin to do: and now nothing will be restrained from them, which they have imagined to do.” [Genesis 6:5; 11:6]. If we start defining right from wrong in a creed or codify it in law, we will be writing forever and running the risk of bias and contradiction.

Conviction replaces guilt when the Spirit speaks to the heart the Word of God. We inflict guilt when we judge one another; so, Jesus urged us not to! [Matthew 7:1]. Paul reminded us that the object of our words is not judging but restoring [Galatians 6:1], and we do it in the most gentle way possible because we could be next!

Addressing Sin

There is more than one reason why in the “home” church sin needs to be addressed. First, “home” ministry is built on transparency. We can hide from one another in the dark during a Sunday Morning concert but not when eye to eye during the week when the conversation in the Biblical text we are

The Church

discussing turns to the very issue we have been hiding. Christians who prefer remaining out of sight simply will not attend, which in itself exposes the inner conflict they struggle with because they would otherwise crave spiritual support. The truth is that believers under conviction do not want to hide but past judgment, accusation and guilt make the risk too great that fellow believers may not understand. Since we are all members of one and the same family of God, we fail one another when we do not recognize the value of that relationship and how to protect and appreciate it.

Secondly, there is a shame we all feel when tempted even though we do not yield. That shame, in itself, defines the sin that made the temptation so alluring. This is sometimes difficult to discuss in a group setting and not feel impure just by talking about it. Some have painful memories attached to some subjects and it is only proper to discuss them when God's Word holds our hands as we walk through the text. When Paul began his letter to the saints at Rome, he outlined the details of an apostasy that guaranteed judgment to those involved [Romans 1:18-32]. I often wondered why raise such a subject until I realized that we cannot talk about holiness without discovering sin.

Third, and probably the least upsetting, is simply having a grasp of what sin means scripturally. Religions by their very nature invent rules and regulations they call sin that are not in the Bible. When Jesus walked through a wheat field hungry with His disciples gleaning a handful of grain, the religious leaders accused them of breaking Torah law. But they didn't. The idea of washing one's hands before eating was something the Rabbis added later!

Sin, what disrupts our peace and strains our relationship with the Lord and one another, is not a simple matter. Our brains prefer examples and not abstraction but the Biblical virtues are relational and they often are defined by and in that relationship. And since our fellowship with our Lord is hinged on our fellowship with one another, every opportunity to get to know one another, get closer to Christ with each other's encouraging

The Church

support, sharpens our focus on righteousness and gives us a clearer understanding of what evil is too.

Fourth, in a spiritual conflict there is strength in numbers in prayer. James invited us to prayer for [and with] one another to live victorious over sin. This is not necessarily a vague or general prayer for “deliverance from evil” [Matthew 6:13]. At times we need extended council with the Lord in prayer with Him reasoning with us [Isaiah 1:18] wrestling with a conscience that disagrees with our carnal side, rationalizing our innocence when we know we are trying unsuccessfully to deceive ourselves, convince ourselves we are right when we know we are wrong. The breakthrough eventually comes when we agree with God [confess] and He washes us clean of it. Often, the Spirit’s counseling happens in a “home” gathering in a quiet awakening in the soul. Sometimes some follow James wise counsel to bring one other into confidence and prayer.

Seldom will this dynamic play out in a Sunday Morning Service. This service is generally not structured for the Spirit to engage in such heart to heart encounters.

The Church

Paul’s Letters to the Corinthians has been called, Francis Godet informed us, “a fragment of ecclesiastical history like no other.” He then observed, “It might be concluded that they [Paul’s letters to Corinth] belong to a past which no more concerns us and consequently has no longer for us a present religious value.” This reveals a tendency on the part of more modern scholarship to make the truth contained in them the subject of an intellectual study rather than a work of conscience or of heart acceptance. Godet then cautioned against interpreting the Corinthian text as mere rhetorical discourse rather than a vigorous call to holiness—something our modern world, in error, shares with the Greek people.

Godet continued, “He [Paul] established himself with the believers, Jews, and proselytes, in a neighboring house belonging to one of his Jewish converts, and from that time he

The Church

preached, especially to Gentiles, not clothing the salvation of Christ, either with the charms of eloquence, or with the attraction of human wisdom, so that if his preaching exercised, a powerful influence, it was solely through the divine working, which accompanied it, and, as the apostle says, by the demonstration of Spirit and of power.” [Godet, 10].

“Paul’s writings and Acts mention several specific homes or households linked to the Corinthian believers, including those of Aquila and Priscilla (1 Corinthians 16:19), Gaius (who hosted “the whole church,” Romans 16:23), Stephanas, Crispus, and others like Chloe’s people (1 Corinthians 1:11). The church functioned as a network of these domestic assemblies that sometimes gathered as a larger group.” [Grok]

A 2020 Bara Group Study found that 6% of American Christians roughly 5,000,000 people regularly attend house churches. This is double of just a decade earlier. The Harvard Institute for Research tracks House Church growth and estimates there are between 300,000 and 400,000 active house church gatherings in America as of 2024. [according to Christian Faith Archive on YouTube].

In an age of social media, information could be skewed or even contrived to support a given narrative or it might be unreliable because a statistical sampling was not representative of the country, but there is still reason to believe that house churches show increasing interest among Millennials and Generation ‘Z’ believers. A fellow pastor related to me a friend of his who pastors multiple home churches that meet as 1 group monthly.

In reporting this, we are not suggesting house churches should replace—what is now called—the “institutional” church. Any reform must be the Spirit’s work.

The Church

The Spirit

Christians should never minimize the importance of the Spirit's work within and among a group of believers gathered to pray or discuss the Scripture. We may miss this truth in 1 Corinthians 12-14 while we focus on the theological or doctrinal ideas we glean from Paul's letter.

It is with this in mind that we interpret Paul's admonishment to the church at Corinth, "If therefore the *whole* church be come together into one place, ... if *all* prophesy, and there come in one ... unlearned [a private person unfamiliar with how the Spirit works] he is convinced [convicted] of *all*, he is judged [scrutinized] of *all*: ... thus are *the secrets of his heart made manifest*; [1 Corinthians 14:23-25].

There is in these few verses a dynamic principle often overlooked that the real work done in any believer's life is not the result of human effort or scholarly advice or even in the testimonies of other believers. It is what the Spirit may do with any of these. He, alone, is the expert. He alone is the teacher or guide, according to John 16:23, into *all* truth. This is why pride in ourselves or our own ability or training is so destructive within the group when we are seeking God's solutions from God's Word.

And this is why no one believer, alone, can be looked to for answers, even a pastor. The Spirit decides whom He will choose to "prophesy." "All prophesy" suggests everyone may prophesy or speak when directed by the Spirit. Prophecy is defined by 3 characteristics: *conviction* [God's reasoning and discussion] followed by *examination* [KJV: judged] or by self-examination followed by the *manifestation* of sins hidden or denied—an unveiling of the heart—in repentant submission to the Spirit of God.

"He is convinced [convicted] of all" means the Spirit is persuasive; God's grace has not been resisted. Conviction is not guilt, it is at last freedom from guilt.

The Church

“He is judged of all.” This word “judged” is not primarily a judicial term or a counseling technique. The word “judged” [in the King James Version] is an investigation: a search to find or learn something. The unlearned and unbelieving are suddenly exposed to the bright light of self-examination from which no hidden motives or secret sins can hid. He senses how vulnerable he has become through self-introspection, self-awareness, because of something that was said. No one knows at this moment what he is feeling and perceiving; how memories wash over him in tidal waves of conviction; but he knows, and until he shares it in his testimony, they do not need to know how the Spirit of God is conversing with him and bringing him to an inner altar of repentance and submission.

“The secrets of his heart made manifest.” Oh the joy of no more secrets! Of discarding the weight or the sin that so easily besets [Hebrews 12:1] and now turning to Jesus who now authors his faith and will be faithful. {Hebrews 12:2}.

Testimonies

We little realize the dynamic energy at work among us in small groups praying, studying the Word and testifying of God’s faithfulness.

“Now, brethren, if I come unto you speaking with tongues, what shall I profit you, except I shall speak to you either by revelation, or by knowledge, or by prophesying, or by doctrine?” [1 Corinthians 14:6].

Godet tells us, “[Paul] was resolved not to have recourse to the modes of action generally used in public conferences, brilliance of oratorical art, dialectic skill, profound speculation. There remained to him only one force – and his grandest act of faith was to wish no other – the simple testimony rendered to Christ and his Cross.” [Godet, on Corinthians, 9].

It isn’t what we know but whom we know, whose love we have experienced, that forms our witness. According to Hebrews 3:5 Moses’ witness was “a testimony of those things

The Church

which were to be spoken after.” Moses had the honor of overseeing the Tabernacle and the sacrificial system within its walls that spoke of Jesus’ coming death and our salvation. The pattern shown him in the mount like our lives are parables of God’s redemptive love. We can share nothing more to explain Him to our world and we ought not say less.

Every testimony, every sermon, every group dialog, ought to be in these 4 forms, like the lifecycle of the butterfly: egg, larva (caterpillar), pupa (chrysalis), and adult. God presents His truth in 4 stages: by revelation, or by knowledge, or by prophesying, or by doctrine.

Everything God says is *revelation* and nothing ever said by anyone else is revelation except God. God changes the heart, opens the heart, writes His law upon it, and explains Truth to us. Revelation is the egg, the beginning of all true divine knowledge and where spiritual life begins.

It becomes *knowledge*—knowledge based on experience, heart-felt, faith-filled, lived knowledge, true spiritual knowledge, “according as his divine power hath given unto us all things that *pertain* unto life and godliness, through the knowledge of him that hath called us to glory and virtue.” [2 Peter 1:3].

Knowledge now takes on the form of a prophecy fulfilled. We spoke of prophecy performing 3 tasks: convicting, examining, and finally revealing or manifesting Truth. This here is what God’s truth does by the Spirit as we live it. It develops within us strong convictions, fully persuaded of God’s promises revealed to us. It strengthens faith, and emboldens commitment to Christ. We might say that the knowledge God revealed to us now dons the prophetic mantle of witness.

Prophecy is the form God’s revealed knowledge takes. It is God’s Word at work forming us into the image of Christ [1 John 3:2] “from glory to glory even as by the Spirit of the Lord” [2 Corinthians 3:18]. For this we enter the chrysalis of suffering with Christ [Hebrews 5:8]. This is what the Greeks called “*pathei mathos*” or learning through suffering.

The Church

Finally, *doctrine* is teaching. Doctrine lived becomes testimony and a witness. As doctrine it is limited to Truth that is revelatory and not based on human logic or thought. Dare we add that true Christian doctrine is always and only a part of the testimony of all believers of the saving grace of God. Whatever is taught that does not originate in the new heart of all believers but comes from the head—no matter how reasonable sounding—is not doctrine that originated in a divine revelation nor does it develop into a Christlikeness within.

Testimonies of this quality should comprise true “Home” group ministry and fellowship. We cannot overstate the importance of reminding every participant in Christian fellowship that: If you haven’t experienced or lived what you want to give witness to, don’t. What you do not own in your heart as a part of you is not yours to share. Our testimonies should always magnify the greatness of our Lord in our lives.

Listening

But believers are capable of and ought to always empathize with others whose experiences in Christ are being shared. True fellowship in a group setting is mostly listening because it is group sharing and group participation. We do not value the ministering of a listening ear as, perhaps we ought, because someone else’s testimony, understandably, reminds us of ours which we are excited about sharing as well. We interrupt one another with such regularity that we all end up giving but never receiving. To allow another’s contribution to pass us by because we were not listening—our minds were working on what next we wished to say—robs us of the benefit of fellowship and later an opportunity to remember them in prayer.

It seems minor, perhaps, but learning to listen as if we were preparing for a college final on another’s testimony is what professional counselors [professional listeners] do. Advice out of thin air is the trade of someone frustrated or not genuinely concerned about others. When later we remember and still later

The Church

at another gathering we ask for any update, they will be blessed to know we cared.

But the larger concern for a home group is allowing the Spirit to direct the course of our study and discussion as well as what we say, in general, to each other. And the Spirit can only be said to lead when we follow. And to follow means to learn to listen to the Spirit within—listen to our hearts as God impresses on us what to say and when to say nothing.

Pastors know how important it is in preparing sermons and homilies to keep their hearts tuned to God's, to listen to their own hearts in which the Spirit resides [John 14:17]. Young believers may still need to learn to identify the Shepherd's voice within but no better place is there for this to happen than in a home gathering magnifying Christ.

Prayer

Listening leads to prayer, a vital aspect of fellowship. "Weep with those who weep." [Romans 12:15]. But prayer is much more. At times it is just an opportunity to wait in God's presence or joining another in support as they voice their needs to the Lord.

As John explained "truly our fellowship *is* with the Father" [1 John 1:3]. This is why we celebrate communion [the Eucharist] together—not in a rushed or mechanical way as if the ritual mattered more than meditating on what our heavenly Father and Jesus did for us. There is no reason not to slow down, sing songs, have more than one prayer or person praying, read the Scriptures and spend time in our Lord's presence with thankful hearts for our salvation, for healing, for protection, for provisions, etc.. This is less likely to happen in the General Service on a Sunday when the schedule is more strictly followed, rushed at times, and, in some churches, followed by another service.

Jethro's Counsel

Exodus 18:19-22 records in Scripture what we might call “The Jethro model.” Jethro, Moses’ father-in-law, on a visit in the wilderness found his son-in-law overburdened with complaints from the Children of Israel. Israel was famous for its murmuring; so, when Moses organized his administration [Numbers 12:7] he mediated their disputes by himself “from the morning unto the evening,” [Exodus 18:13] which gave Jethro serious concern about Moses’ health, diagnosing this “too heavy “ [Exodus 18:18]. So, Jethro advised the following:

“Hearken now unto my voice,” Jethro probably spoke in a stern but understanding way, “I will give you counsel [here’s what you must do], and may God be with you: Be to the people God’s representative [if you must], that you bring their causes unto God. But [here’s how] teach them [others] ordinances and laws, and show them the way wherein they must walk [how to go about administrating justice], and the work that [what] they must do. Out of all the people identify able men, such as fear God, men of truth, hating covetousness; and place *such* over them, *to be* rulers of thousands, *and* rulers of hundreds, rulers of fifties, and rulers of tens: And let them judge the people at all seasons: and it shall be, *that* every great matter they shall bring unto you, but every small matter they shall judge: so shall it be easier for you, and they shall bear *the burden* with you.” [Exodus 18:19-22].

Jethro advised dividing the work among as many judges as might assign no more than 10 cases to any one judge—including Moses. Understandably, this would require a number of judges; hopefully, not everyone is litigious. Such a number of

Jethro's Counsel

cases would require thousands of judges for a nation around a million men and women, according to the census in Numbers 1:46 & Numbers 26:51. But if this sounds unwieldy for many, how about for just Moses! The point is: Jethro—we can believe with Divine approval—suggested that many hands make the work lighter.

When Eldad and Medad (your dad and my dad) were prophesying, Joshua wanted them to stop, but Moses, offered this gentle reprimand, “Are you jealous for me? Would God that all the LORD’S people were prophets, and that the LORD would put his spirit upon them” [Numbers 11:29]. This was God’s plan! “I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh; and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy” [Joel 2:28].

Corporate Churches

Jethro’s model for leadership can be superimposed on the Church in a general sense: many hands make light work. There is a limit to how many people any one pastor can care for spiritually before burning out; so, larger churches tend to assign ministry to designated deacons and elders or provide special ministry for various spiritual and social needs. But all this is centralized under the administration and supervision of a board elected—not by God, per se, but—by what Francis Schaefer in his 1970 book *The Church at the End of the Twentieth Century* spoke of as, “a dictatorship of 51 percent.”

It is unfortunate, in a way, that the Church has followed the corporate model of investing large amounts of the work of God into the hands of a few. The corporate model has proven risky: corporate wheat farms, bee farms, cattle farms, and the like. Disease can wipe out an entire industry. A financial crisis or moral indiscretion in a mega church impacts an entire Christian community.

Persecution in Acts 8 scattered the Christians, often thought to be used by God [Romans 8:28] causing the work to not only survive but thrive during the Church’s infancy. James recognized them as “brethren” [James 1:2]. Peter called them the

Jethro's Counsel

elect “kept by the power of God through faith” [1 Peter 1:5]. This was as Jesus prophesied “You will be witnesses unto me both in Jerusalem, and in all Judaea, and in Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth.” [Acts 1:8]. This, no doubt, meant the multiplication of house churches. Saul’s persecution explicitly targeted these by “entering house after house” [Acts 8:3].

Commentators describe this as the church shifting from a “come and see” model (centered in Jerusalem’s temple) to a “go and tell” model through everyday believers in homes [www.preceptaustin.org]. Although, meeting in “homes” cannot be argued as essential to the propagation of the Gospel or church growth, it can be argued that the smaller group model is a more spiritually robust approach to ministry sustaining a healthier witness especially during persecution. The smaller groups are more decentralized—not in terms of fellowship, because they can still gather together in larger groups—in terms of *leadership*. There is a sense in which a scattered work is more in the hands of God instead of a few select persons. And since it is God’s Church, this sounds more Biblical.

The institutional church by its sheer size has become a corporate “church” work, to paraphrase C. M. Ward from the old A of G Revival-time broadcast, “too much administrated, not enough led.” Institutional church work requires a level of professionalism, training, and education to handle corporate issues: financial, legal, logistical. None of this burdens the “house” work freeing its members to focus on the Bible and prayer as well as charity. And unlike the corporate church, “house” churches are in many more hands; many more people contribute or participate in actual Bible-based ministry. If being scattered has an advantage, especially during times of persecution, the smaller groups are already prepared.

Small Churches

There are, no doubt, a number of churches whose attendance or membership is low—perhaps, a few dozen people or less. These works should consider the House-church model to revive the

Jethro's Counsel

work. Small groups from necessity could be organized for Bible study, prayer, and fellowship. If around a meal, it might included communion.

The difficulty here is relegating the traditional church format or ritual to a lesser importance. Reverend Vincent J. Donovan, Missionary to the Masai of Tanzania, in his book "Christianity Rediscovered" spoke of rediscovering the Christian message when the Masai refused the traditional Mass as it is celebrated in the western world for a ritual more culturally significant for them. Donovan conceded, page 92, "It was not scripture or theology, which prevented them [the Masai] from doing what they thought they had a right to do, but simply the history of a church embedded in a single culture, with its own ideas, coming from that culture, as to what number of years of seminary training were needed to lead a community in the simple act of celebrating the Lord's supper, as he told us to do. Any command of his [God's] to undergo academic training before attempting to break bread together is strikingly missing in scripture."

Just for my amusement I asked Grok [what I knew already], "What church ritual or form must a service take according to the New Testament?" Grok read, "Acts 2:42 (the earliest summary): The believers 'devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.' This is the closest thing to a basic pattern."

"Because a missionary comes from another already existing church," wrote Donovan, "that is the image of church he will have in mind, and if his job is to establish a church, that is the church he will establish. I think, rather, a missionaries's job is to preach, not the church, but Christ. If he preaches Christ and the message of Christianity, the church may well result, may well appear, but it might not be the church he had in mind."

A Computer Search

Grok added [we know this to be true already] The New Testament prioritizes: Apostolic teaching/Scripture-centered

Jethro's Counsel

instruction, fellowship and mutual encouragement, prayer, singing praise to God, The Lord's Supper as a regular remembrance, and orderly, edifying conduct led by qualified elders (1 Timothy 3, Titus 1).

What it did *not* require was: A specific order of service (e.g., no mandated "liturgy"), ... vestments, set prayers, ... or architectural requirements. Nor did it require a particular day or frequency beyond regular gathering (though the first day of the week is associated with breaking bread). No clericalism or elaborate ceremony is mentioned. *"Early meetings were often in homes."* Grok read.

There is a danger associated with a weekend ritual the represents holiness replacing that holiness, itself, in our hearts.

Religion

Religion [not the legal definition but historical one] at its root is a pious discipline that seeks to define a holiness that, hopefully, in the eyes of God will be viewed as true worship [John 4:20-23]. To give this concrete form, rituals were instituted in order to celebrate that holy quest as well as give it expression.

But holiness is an abstract term in a sinful world. We may celebrate it but how do we find it! How do we experience it? How do we define it this side of heaven? This is the true quest, the real process, which the supplicant or acolyte seeks: "as He who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct," [1 Peter 1:15 NKJV]. So, to understand holiness, the religious mind has first to identify sin. But what is sin—or, evil?

Augustine taught that evil is *privatio boni* [the privation of good]. In his Confessions, Book VII, chapters 11–13 Augustine maintained "corruption presupposes an underlying good that it diminishes." In his Enchiridion he wrote, "What, after all, is anything we call evil except the privation of good?"

How can we identify what sin is, if it is the absence of "holiness"—and we don't know what "holiness" means! This is truly a catch 22 scenario. Augustine recognized holiness as the

Jethro's Counsel

restored state of the soul, not static moral perfection but dynamic participation in God's life, made possible by Christ's mediation and the Spirit's work.

Agreed!

All we are saying, however, is that light has no fellowship with darkness [2 Corinthians 6:14] but we have not defined either the light nor that darkness. Augustine is right in saying, define "light" because darkness is in its absence. One identifies sin by contrasting it with the ordered good revealed in Christ and Scripture.

The Danger

That is the Spirit's burden and ministry within Christianity [John 16:8-10]. And He teaches holiness not as a process but as a *following* [John 16:13] after Christ [Luke 9:23]. Sin as the absence of Holiness, does not define that holiness, following Christ *does*.

But the danger is the religious mind, even in an honest effort to understand, may, and does, filter through human logic the Spirit's teachings or what is written in the Word. And then we, possibly, relegate too much importance to the ritual. This was exactly the mistake proselytes to Christianity from Judaism made according to the Epistle to the Hebrews. Their sacrificial system or ceremonial law was "a shadow of the good things" [Hebrews 10:1] not the good things themselves, not holiness itself. Augustine, also, explicitly connects true worship to holiness rather than mere external ritual. In his work, *City of God* [Book 10], he describes the "true sacrifice" as "every work that unites us to God in holy fellowship."

It seems more logical and easier to understand, if we simplify holiness in terms of living a good, moral, respectable life. Add to this regular church attendance and we develop an assurance of heaven. But it could be false hope because it stems not from a love for the Savior and a recognition by faith of what He provided on Calvary, but from a definition of religion.

Jethro's Counsel

The task of defining holiness in terms of following Christ is missionary work—not only foreign but also home. It is here where the small group ministry, the house church, has the greatest value because it provides a commitment without the ceremonial embellishments and gives true value to the weekend rituals that the larger christian gathering is formed around.

Purge Old Leaven

“Purge out therefore the old leaven, that you may be a new lump, as you are unleavened. For even Christ our passover is sacrificed for us: [1 Corinthians 5:7]. “And every man that hath this hope in him purifies himself, even as he [Jesus] is pure” [1 John 3:3].

Since we are now familiar with some concept of “sin” holiness might be defined as a virtue absent “the sin which doth so easily beset” [Hebrews 12:1]. James wrote, “Pure religion and undefiled before God and the Father is this [among other things], To ... keep himself unspotted from the world.” [James 1:27].

All theology claims to map this journey. Some doctrine begins with a declaration of righteousness followed by a progressive sanctification. Others, in a more detailed theology, require acts of penance which may need time after death to complete the task of purification [purgatory: though Catholicism concurs that this is not a biblical idea].

The short of it is: Any teaching that does not recognize this process of confession and cleansing [1 John 1:9] has capitulated to basic human drives erasing both terms, “sin” and “holiness,” from their minds. They no longer believe in God! Or if they do, they do so for no reason! Christ Jesus’ crucifixion carries for them no significance or meaning. The whole purpose behind our witness is not to reveal how loving God is but how dangerous it is to live in sin and for which reason, He died!

Jethro's Counsel

Missionary Work

Perhaps, in the western world, missionary work and small group “house” church work are thought as different things, but they are not! Every ministry begins “small.” And every person when first accepting the Gospel message is only inside the entrance to “this grace wherein we stand” [Romans 5:2].

To learn a given denominational form of worship is a separate education. This makes the liturgy problematic in itself because it requires training in, and learning of, the symbolism and meaning. And many astute minds might ask, “Why?”

Many believers raised on the intimacy and sense of belonging and friendship that is created in small groups may never want anything else. So, when they learn there was never any instruction in the Bible beyond this, they may be hard to convince of the value in what is now offered within the institutional church!

Perhaps for this reason churches prefer to close and sell off property to investors that transform sanctuaries into classrooms and offices, and parking lots. But if the building is paid for and the denomination has the equity to reinvest, they might want to open their door—and I dare say, their hearts—to small group ministries. Even if it seems to be counterintuitive, it is still *God*! I know, the problem is: We don’t know what God is going to do with it [He cannot be trusted to revive our ministerial interests, our denominational form of worship]. It is still *our* property!

Gen ' Z '

Many churches are holding on until the few remaining, who are elderly, are no longer alive. Meanwhile the Millennials and Generation Z'ers have left. For some of us, old folk, within the next decade or so we may not be in attendance either. Would it not be better to turn the ministry over to them? Many persons in old age have accumulated a certain amount of wealth, a legacy

Jethro's Counsel

of sorts, which they kept for the next generation. Why not the church! I love my grandchildren enough to give them my savings, but not my God?

If they don't see value in the ritual, maybe there is not enough there *to* see. If they want a greater sense of fellowship, a greater meaning to their faith, are they wrong? Someday, we'll be in heaven; and the last time I researched it out, heaven is the place of spirit-filled *fellowship*, reunion, *family*! Do we really imagine our particular form of worship will survive this life unchanged!

No one here is trying to convince anyone that they need to change. That would be presumptuous and arrogant. But if you find yourself at home in a "home" ministry, loving the love, longing to belong, a parched soul drinking from the "Well" of water that springs up unto eternal life and you are inclined to want to stay in this house church even though so much is different, a bit strange, and, in a way, you know you'll miss if you leave.

Well, don't!

Don't leave!

The Challenge

Well, there is only one challenge in a house ministry. A small group regardless of where they meet will have problems only with each other. If we are united, there is no problem. If there are “issues,” they will be interpersonal or relational.

As believers in Christ, we are family and families often disagree. We should never be naive enough to think this will never happen when it is guaranteed to happen. In the larger church assembly, we may hid from people we don’t favor or we may choose to go elsewhere but these options are not as handy when we attend a small group that has played a vital part in our Christian growth and we have a sense of family with all the members in the group except that one person that we don’t like.

Tensions between members of the smaller group are guaranteed for another more immediate reason: The accuser of the brethren. Revelation 12:10 uses a word that emphasizes Satan’s craft as public slander, and lies [Genesis 3:1]. Satan’s moniker “the devil” means “accuser,” also in the sense that he is highly persuasive in controlling the minds and thoughts of others against someone. We get our word “diabolic” from the Greek.

This is why when Satan is putting brother against brother or sister against sister [Philippians 4:2] God gave us “forgiveness” as the antidote: “Lest Satan should get an advantage of us: for we are not ignorant of his devices” or the way he thinks [2 Corinthians 2:11]. These are thoughts that put one against another and “exalts itself against the knowledge of God” [2 Corinthians 10:5]. As believers—and especially within a

The Challenge

spiritually significant fellowship—we need to stay alert to that shadowy figure behind the curtain of our conversations!

Peter said “Be sober, be vigilant” [1 Peter 5:8]—words that speak to our being on the alert to the devil’s movements like a crouching lion: Genesis 4:7 [NLT] says, “Sin is crouching at the door.” There are 3 words for being “alert” and the one which simply means “a wakeful state or no sleep in you” is not used here because we *do* get sleepy when it comes to the accuser! He waits for the moment we let down our guard to pounce, according to Peter, “seeking whom he may devour.” “Vigilance” here means to arouse ourselves—do what we must to wake up! And then be “sober” or stay awake—lots of spiritual coffee! It is difficult to train oneself to remain alert but Satan is waiting his opportunity. When our thoughts, what we dwell on, are on sinful things he stirs up trouble between us, as believers. Being aware of him goes a long way in defeating him!

This brief work is not intended as a course on pastoral counseling or eldership training. The message that God wanted to share with us, He already has, having inscribed it on our hearts—Christian love. If we listen to our own hearts, to the Spirit of God within us, and the voice of the Shepherd, we will discover that the knowledge necessary to be in fellowship with other believers is already part of us. This chapter is only intended to point out how necessary our new heart is for that fellowship to occur!

Somebody Said the Wrong Thing

In Matthew 5:11 Jesus defines His use of the word *reproach* or *revilement* as “all manner of evil against you falsely, for my sake.” It is the employment of abusive and insulting language not against the believer but against their message: Jesus said, “for my sake.”

But there may be harsher words spoken than these where “words” are directed not at what is said but the person, themselves. Jesus heals a blind man and *the blind man*, is in trouble with the authorities! It was not what happened to him

The Challenge

that bothered the religious leaders; the man was the problem. “You are his disciple.” [John 9:28]. It was not something he said but something he became, a witness for Christ, that brought on their ire. There is a saying, “People are not problems, people have problems.” Regardless of the wisdom this statement projects, We don’t always see this difference in the heat of an argument.

Some persons may “mock” the message, finding it, perhaps comedic, and ridiculously absurd. This was Paul’s experience on Mar’s Hill in Acts 17:32 when he mentioned the resurrection from the dead. Many philosopher types dismissed his words as unworthy of further discussion. At a conference early in my pastoring I asked a question which the leader ignored. After a brief pause, he entertained another one. My young bride and I were somewhat offended by it, but it shows how an insensitive moment may disrupt the flow of what God’s Spirit is doing.

To assume everything we say will always be well received or that others will understand the intent behind them or how our mind works—even among believers—is, at least, a bit presumptuous. God might be giving us something to share with others who initially repel the thought. The reasons are not important here because it isn’t the Greeks in conversation with Paul or the Pharisees with the healed blind man that we are concerned about. It is Paul’s reaction, the blind man’s response, and how we answer “when men shall revile, and persecute [relentlessly], and shall say all manner of evil” or they simply misinterpret our kindness.

We went down this road to point out that how we interpret other believers is increasingly relevant when they become a part of our Christian experience. This is why listening is so important. This is guaranteed to happen in small groups where dialog is encouraged, more so, than in the larger assembly once a week while we sit in silence.

The Challenge

I Don't Like Them

So what if someone is in the fellowship you regret is there or wish they were not? The trend is always to rationalize reasons why our feelings are legitimate; so, we reason we will do the “honorable” thing and let the Lord work it all out. But all this is intending to legitimize feelings toward another brother or sister in Christ which we should not endorse. We need to harness our feelings, not let them control. I have a simple rule, “Any friend of Jesus is a friend of mine!”

The Corinthians found out that Satan loves to join us at play in the sandbox when we start throwing sand! [A memory from kindergarten, 1949]. The Corinthians were divided over who they wanted to follow: Peter or Paul or Apollos [1 Corinthians 1:12]. This could have meant 3 different house ministries at the time or endless arguments over doctrine within the same group.

What do we do when someone there is divisive? [never us!] What do we do when we just don't like them and we can't say how or why? Maybe their personality, maybe their doctrine, maybe the way they talk [we don't mean slow or fast or with a speech impediment] but the words they use either make no sense or they seem to be too negative all the time or they speak poorly of someone, we highly regard. And on and on it goes....

“Any friend of Jesus is a friend of mine!” We must learn “acceptance” which we spoke about in “*Koinonia*.”

My Feelings are More than Friendship

Transference [the redirection to a substitute, usually a therapist, of emotions that were originally felt in childhood] is a real thing. Also, hormones and neurotransmitters that in the brain define emotions, especially pleasure. We are all “more or less” human when it comes to feelings and how those feelings rely on underlying memories and generally how we perceive our relationships. We may love all Christians but not in the way or

The Challenge

expressed as we do toward a spouse or children. But when feelings get tangled or confused, we must engage our Christian conscience and will to immediately untangle them.

Donna was a student of mine who signed up for every class I taught in this little Bible school in Western PA. She was uncommonly playful outside class around me and even toasted some english muffins for me to begin the school day when I arrived each morning. And when I needed to pick up extra cash because—no doubt many of us on staff were underpaid at the time—she alone signed up to assist me in painting the school president's house.

Now, before you go somewhere no man has gone before, I knew this was emotionally and spiritually unhealthy and took steps to redirect her interests from me. Was it tempting for me to enjoy so much needless attention? Of course, that's the human part. But many saw and many misinterpreted what they saw because—again, we are all human and we know what it means to be human.

Donna was probably just being Donna but I had to take steps to prevent transferring my affection off my wife unto her—a common temptation and mistake—again, because we are human. God blessed us with endorphins and dopamine transmitters in our brains that provide feelings of pleasure and can leave us wanting more. Only the Spirit of God in cooperative effort with our own wills can bring stray emotions back in line. My wife and I are soon to begin our 59th year married and still in love—more so!

It would be hard for me to believe this scenario isn't repeated over and over again in small groups—sometimes with hurtful results. When, in one church I pastored, the Sunday School director and the teen class teacher took the kids on a weekend outing [a common practice] unfortunately for 2 marriages, they returned “in love.” No amount of counsel seemed to be able to stop it. It had a tragic ending. I share this to encourage all believers to be on their guard as Peter already warned us.

The Challenge

We all need protection from this. The Youtube video world is lit up with account after account of ministerial indiscretion and the devil is having a field day out of it. And what about our witness to the world? What about the work God wants to accomplish within the group?

I am sure this scene plays out over and over again because it is the easiest one for Satan to work with. “But every man is tempted, when he is drawn away of his own lust, and enticed.” [James 1:14]. And we must know that small group ministries, which we have called “house” or “home” ministries or church, has to be Satan’s number 1 interest because spiritually it is the most dangerous for him. A study in the book of Acts can be seen as a record of his attempts at destroying the church in its infancy.

They Are not the Leader

Some people like to lead even if God has never chosen them to. Gaius was the elder leading his home ministry [3 John 1]. Diotrephes was trying to usurp a position there he was never called of God to be in [3 John 9].

Perhaps, this challenge is not as evident within the smaller group as it might be in the church as a whole, but remaining humble even after being elected to lead is not easy for some persons in authority in the church. When someone believes they are responsible for how the money is spent or to approve pastoral vision or, even, protect denominational doctrine, they become cautiously less likely to allow the pastor freedom of ministry and a conflict may result. I knew a teacher in college, who, as a pastor, like to represent the opposite of his own interest in a matter, knowing the board would disapprove—and conversely approve the very thing he *did* want.

Most tensions within church leadership are unknown to parishioners. After I was dismissed from one ministry, I spoke with the church’s organist at the wedding of our eldest son. She was perplexed over why we left.

The Challenge

There may be from time to time one or more persons who seems too outspoken, too pushy, too demanding, too sure of themselves, to humbly allow the group to share. The rams are ready to butt heads to see who gets to speak. The Corinthians church, little doubt, had to contend with this problem.

“Are all apostles? are all prophets? are all teachers?” [1 Corinthians 12:26].

No!

“Even so, forasmuch as you are zealous of things pertaining to the spiritual, seek that you may excel to the *edifying* of the church. ... How is it then, brethren? when you come together, *every one* has a psalm, has a doctrine [teaching], has a tongue [is inspired to speak], has a revelation [*mine* is from God!], has an interpretation [I know what this verse means]? Let all things be done unto edifying.” [1 Corinthians 14:12, 26].

Unfortunately, because of glossolalia and pentecostal denominations, we have lost the real context here, failing to see that in Corinth everyone was pushing and shoving to be heard! I recall after the Charismatic Conference in 1979 held at Duquesne University at a group photo one of the speakers anticipating the shutter snap of the camera wormed his way from the back row until he was front and center when the picture was taken.

I Am Jealous

Jealousy and zeal are the same word in both Greek and Hebrew which means we have an interesting feeling that we need to interpret within us. And this is true of all our feelings. It is not playing at being a therapist to examine ourselves. “Examine [test] yourselves, whether you are in the faith; prove [approve] your own selves. Do you not know [have you not experienced] your own selves, how that Jesus Christ is in you, except you be reprobates [disapproved]?”

I was reading in Exodus 20 one day and told gramma that the Bible said God was jealous [Exodus 20:5]. Gramma scolded me, telling me to never say such a thing again because

The Challenge

jealousy is a sin. Had I read the scripture: “I the LORD thy God am a zealous God,” gramma would have been Okay with hearing that: “He shall stir up His *zeal* like a man of war.” [Isaiah 42:13 NKJV].

Passion is best controlled by the person exhibiting it. When others try to muffle someone’s enthusiasm, this possibly could be an unintentional attempt at silencing their joy. But some of us are louder than others. Someone’s delight in the Lord [Psalm 37:4] should never be hidden; it is part of their testimony; their heart is doing the talking.

There is a negative side to all this if one is really sensing jealousy or envy about another’s achievement or significance.

They Think They are Always Right

Doctrinal issues will never go away. If we choose only to fellowship with believers who totally agree with our interpretation of scripture, we will be alone. A denominational leader once sympathetically urged me to leave the church I was pastoring to look for one closer in agreement with my teaching. He saw nothing wrong with my knowledge of scripture but elders in the church were not comfortable. Some thought I was too psychological and should teach more theology; others were afraid that the doctrine of glossolalia would surface eventually and I might be opposite their position. We had entered a new age in the life of the church when HIV infections were killing young people. The church was alive with social issues surrounding new comers and those new to the faith, all hinting at changes that older folk found difficult to accept—and this was their church.

All these issues need to find a scriptural basis for acceptance or rejection. Everything in the institutional church is ultimately doctrinal in scope. When the national leaders within the denomination issue a theological position on these matters, all is well with the world; but some ministries are autonomous. Many home churches or small group gatherings are independent

The Challenge

because they represent believers from multiple theological backgrounds. How do they unite over doctrine?

The answer is keeping the focus where Paul kept it, where the Spirit wants it, on Jesus. It helps, again, to learn to listen; be accepting of one another, and extend our Christian love to embrace a few others who might not think as we do. And just maybe they might be wiser than us in some cases!

They Smell

Sometimes people betray cultural identifiers: by the foods they eat, by the places they work, by their personal habits including hygiene. I have had to sit next to garlic eaters or certain fragrances of woman's perfumes on the train going to work. I mention these, obviously, because they made me very uncomfortable. Turns out: I had to keep breathing!

Old people in assisted living as well as some persons who do not bath daily [and maybe should] may not be the most pleasing osmically to be around. Then there is the mechanic whose day spend in grease and oil follows him to the gathering. Halitosis, head colds, cigarette and cigar odors, are a whole category in itself of the conditions that seem to make some persons less attractive to us.

We were kids in the fifth grade in the school yard lining up to go into class when I noticed a chalk line on the asphalt that circled around pointing to our class. These words were written along it: "Follow this track to stink attack." Turns out, Leonard had a body odor that wouldn't quit. I found this out when we doubled up to see a video and I shared a desk seat with Leonard. Breathing was difficult for me in this circumstance. Full disclosure, in our high school days, Leonard would show up at football games with a convertible full of pretty girls. He was no longer the grammar school Leonard I knew in fifth grade!

The only advice I can give is try not to stand out from the crowd because you smell. But, just as important, don't stay away either! If God accepts you as you are, God's people should

The Challenge

also! Maybe there is a compromise to be had. I also know that the Love of God in our hearts is capable of hugging a few persons we, otherwise, would never even be around. We may need more of that kind of love.

The Cross

Following Christ is all about the “Cross” we are to carry [Luke 9:23]. “House” ministry was made for this! A weekend church service may provide some encouragement but it does not underscore in our hearts that we are never alone while experiencing trials. The fellowship in the smaller gathering will because it naturally focuses on the life of each believer in the group.

Jesus always sent His disciples out by two or more—never alone. Paul was part of a missionary contingent. Even in prison, he was not alone. Silas was with him in the Philippian jail in Acts 16. In Rome under house arrest “Paul dwelt two whole years in his own hired house, and received all that came in unto him.” [Acts 28:30]. His companions included Luke and at times Timothy. Aristarchus [Acts 19:29; 20:4; 27:2], Mark [2 Timothy 4:11], and Epaphras [Philemon 23] were familiar fellow workers with him.

Paul was not idle during this time. He received many visitors. He was not forbidden to teach those who came to see him. He likely composed several epistles. “Indeed, it was a fruitful time for Paul.” [CCEL.org].

We need fellowship with others of faith that identify with us as co-workers in Christ. In the closing to his letter to the Romans Paul sends greetings to persons who accompanied him at times in his journeys and in prayer. His love to them reads like an honor roll of saints much like Hebrews 11 only these are helping him carry a cross of ministry. “Salute Andronicus and Junia, my *kinsmen*, and my *fellow prisoners*, who are of note among the apostles, who also were in Christ before me.”

The Cross

[Romans 16:7]. Adronicus was called an apostle in the same way Barnabas was, through association with Paul [Acts 14:14]. These are the names of some of the fellow laborers who had worked exhaustively beside Paul in the kingdom. It can't be easy to divide up titles and make one an apostle but not another when their ministries overlap in evangelism and prayer. More than one wore the epithet, "My beloved." A very special family for Paul according to Romans 16:13 he addressed as: "Rufus chosen in the Lord, and his mother and mine." Rufus, tradition says, was the son of Simon of Cyrene [Mark 15:21] who bore the cross for the Savior. [Lightfoot on Philippians. Page 174].

In the smaller gathering, conversation naturally turns to the challenges we share in serving Christ. In the larger gathering, we might depend on the sermon to speak to our situation and it may not happen. Many pastors prepare expository sermons that follow a text making it less likely they will be speaking to a particular trial we are going through. But our trials become part of our testimony and the smaller group is assembled for that very purpose, to share our lives with one another and how Christ is leading each.

Lost & Found

Jesus must have shocked the sensibilities of His disciples when He taught, "He that doesn't take up his cross, and follow me, is not worthy of me. He that finds his life shall lose it: and he that loses his life for my sake shall find it." [Matthew 10:38-39].

This very statement from the Master requires dialog. Young believers need examples, testimonies, from the lives of persons they know, and have come to respect for their witness, in order to get a kind of "intellectual" feel and heartfelt understanding for how this interprets in their own life and experience. No sermon alone can say what needs to be said. Twelve men and a few ladies would inevitably know what it meant as they traversed Canaan following the Savior, observing His life and listening to His responses to opposition.

The Cross

Paul enlightened us as to how this works, “Be followers of me, even as I also am of Christ” [1 Corinthians 11:1]. This is not an invitation to a weekend church service but a living example of how to live for Christ. And we need an ongoing connection with someone like a “Paul” to be able to learn this truth. This is what small group ministry is all about!

It is in the smaller circles that subjects as this may be—must be—discussed. Material blessings are immaterial. Someone said of Isaiah 43:2, He leads us out into the deep knowing Satan can’t swim! When the disciples were caught in the middle of the Lake [Matthew 14:24] this was the safest place in which to detain them since the crowd earlier sought to crown Jesus their king! [John 6:15].

Peter, on one occasion, no doubt mindful of this unforgettable teaching, spoke up, “We’ve given up everything to follow you. What will we get?” [Matthew 19:27]. And Jesus replied, ““I assure you that when the world is made new [in the New Jerusalem] and the Son of Man sits upon his glorious throne, you who have been my followers will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel. And everyone who has given up houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or property, for my sake, will receive a hundred times as much in return and will inherit eternal life.” [Matthew 19:28-29]. Jesus followed up with a parable on grace which shows that Peter had much to understand yet. He finally would learn that it was not about rewards but “receiving the end of your faith, even the salvation of your souls.” [1 Peter 1:9].

Hermeneutics

Bible studies are a study in hermeneutics—the Greek word for interpretation—because the story of God in the Scripture needs to not only be translated into English but interpreted as to its meaning and emphasis. The overarching message is the story of “The Cross.” We should be able to see Calvary and the Story of the incarnation, death, and resurrection of the Savior in every

The Cross

narrative and in every promise. This is what small groups are all about—not a debate over doctrinal differences.

A Bible study is a study in the Atonement, in the need for and provision of an eternal salvation, of what sin is and a victory over it, of holiness and ultimately following Christ. The story of Scripture unfolds starting with Eden and the introduction of an evil only God can and will eradicate [Isaiah 43:25]. The Cross is the story within the story, the message in the narrative, which we see only by revelation from God [Matthew 16:17]. This affirms our salvation [Romans 10:9-10]. When, for example, the Lord instructed Abraham to take Isaac to Mount Moriah, it was God's Son on His own mind that was the center of this story, not Isaac. How do we know? It was a "test" for Abraham [Genesis 22:1], a test to confirm the Patriarch's faithfulness. But this alone does not give the account Biblical significance. It was not about Abraham's "only son"] [Genesis 22:2]; for, Abraham had another son, Ishmael. The story, in a "parable" way, was about *God's!*

Epilogue

Any believer who reads the Acts of the Apostles or the Epistles will discover that what brings the text to life is not the doctrines that we have defended over the centuries against other believers [non-believers, I have discovered, have no interest in such things]. It is not a story of miracles but of relationships. Bishop Lightfoot reminded us in his commentary on Philippians [1:2] that “Though the gospel is capable of doctrinal exposition, though it is eminently fertile in moral results, yet its substance is neither a dogmatic system nor ethical code, but a Person and a Life.” The Gospel is “fellowship with [each other] and truly our fellowship is with the Father, and with his Son Jesus Christ.” [1 John 1:3].

So, in simplest terms: We should want to participate in this fellowship and not just celebrate it.

Who, Me?

This book is a brief summary of 24 plus years of ministry—things I couldn’t see while I was involved in them. Perhaps, the best sermon ever preached was probably painfully delivered while the message tore at the conscience of many in attendance. When this happens, it is unlikely the preacher will value it immediately as God must have when He commissioned it. And sometimes the sermon is followed by a dismissal but not because it was ill-advice.

During two and a half decades of swimming up stream this salmon always wondered if I was in the wrong river! But in

Epilogue

retrospect, it is now independently clear to me I was in the right place at the right time. It was God's post graduate course that many of His servants go through teaching them what cannot be effectively learned any other way. In Greek it is called *pathei mathos*, learning through suffering—as Jesus did [Hebrews 5:8].

As Paul testified, "Most gladly therefore will I rather glory in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me." [2 Corinthians 12:9]. Then he confessed, "I will very gladly spend and be spent for you; though the more abundantly I love you, the less I be loved." [2 Corinthians 12:15].

It is very difficult to complain about something for which Paul glorified God! "I will not glory," he affirmed, "but in mine infirmities. ... Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in necessities, in persecutions, in distresses for Christ's sake: for when I am weak, then am I strong." [2 Corinthians 12:5, 10].

All of this sounds unhealthy until we realize this is spiritual warfare [Ephesians 6:12]. Peter explained, "Think it not strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you, as though some strange thing happened to you: But rejoice, inasmuch as you are partakers of Christ's sufferings...." [1 Peter 4:12-13]. Little wonder John the Baptist at a low point in his life asked the unthinkable about Jesus, "Are you he that should come, or do we look for another?" [Matthew 11:3]. He knew differently but as Jesus pointed out, "Since the days of John the Baptist ... the kingdom of heaven has been suffering violence...." [Matthew 11:12].

In saying all this, we are not trying to put a favorable spin on a life that attempted to honor God but failed miserably at it. Nor are we wanting to disparage anyone caught in the undertow of some Satanic tidal wave. Every believer knows that there is a cross to carry for the Savior and not everything is always going to look like success. We must learn in retrospect and with prayerful gaze to look back upon the past—only now—through a different pair of eyes. That is what this book is about!

In so doing, I do not disown my mistakes or view my past sins with indifference. I confess them and own them but I

Epilogue

also want to bury them. I want to see past the haze of regret and look for the Savior's hand pointing me through it.

We, as believers, learn best to swim in deepest waters. We learn to trust our Lord best in darkest valleys. We learn to follow Him best in the forest where no path is marked. This is, in a most personal way, every believer's story.

Full Disclosure

We tend not to admit it but, as Abraham Maslow once quipped, "I suppose it is tempting, if the only tool you have is a hammer, to treat everything as if it were a nail." In the case of Scripture, God wants us to see ourselves in its pages, to identify the ministry that is the best fit to our personality or who we are—but not to the exclusion of everyone else! And this is what we have been concerned about in this brief work.

If I have learned anything about myself, it is that I love to teach the Word of God and that requires the smaller group setting where there can be student feedback and the teacher-student relationship can have a part in the learning process. I could preach to thousands but I have less than no interest to do so. On the other hand, reading Pastor John Neal's book, "You are Ministers: The Application of the Covenant Household Model of Life and Ministry" was more than exciting. He may have pushed me, inadvertently, into writing this book.

Perhaps, we should read this from another perspective: Jesus' Parable of the Talents. "For the kingdom of heaven is as a man traveling into a far country, who called his own servants, and delivered unto them his goods. And unto one he gave five talents, to another two, and to another one; *to every man according to his several ability*; and straightway took his journey. [Matthew 25:14-15]. Paul echoed this parable in 1 Corinthians 12:18, "But now hath God set the members every one of them in the body, as it hath pleased him." In verse 11 we read, "dividing to every man *severally* [*"according to his several ability"*] as he [The Spirit] wills."

Epilogue

I am a one talent kind of guy in the small group setting. Some are called to lead thousands. If I were an officer in the army, I would be most comfortable staying a lieutenant and being with the men in combat. I would leave the “general-ing” to others. When I was a computer programmer, a good friend who wrote code with me was elevated to a managerial position which I could see was a wrong fit—not because he wasn’t competent to do so, but—because, as it turned out, he wanted to code and not spend his day in business meetings. They later down-graded him back to his old position much to his happiness.

Some of us are suited to ministry on a more personal [small group] level and when we read this possibility in [or did we read it “into”] the New Testament Church, there is hope that it may once again show promise. It is a perfect fit for the pastor who has a small congregation to begin with. Why not gather your congregation around the front for prayer or bring the podium closer to the people and allow them to open the Bible and dialog with you over your message, synagogue-style. “After someone spoke or taught in the synagogue, discussion was not only common but expected. It was a participatory environment built for engaging with God’s Word together, not just hearing it.” [Grok]

25 Years

What highlighted ministry for me over the years was always being with the people. What I hated was organizing picnics, attending board meetings, raising money, and the like. And that saying, “You are only as good as your last sermon”? Don’t you, too, want to give that person such a pinch for saying it! It’s not true! But that’s how involved we get with a Sunday Morning or weekend service. We spend hours weekly preparing that single message instead of just studying the Word with the people. But then again, that is the “talent” for some pastors and I, for one, would not begrudge them that.

I cannot explain how fulfilled it made me feel when there was a breakthrough in a counseling session, or I said that

Epilogue

one thing someone needed to hear—even if the rest of the group slept through it—or God used me in an unexpected way or I was burdened in prayer and it turned out to be God and He answered in some miraculous way! For me, these were glimpses of a heaven I crave to be in. These are “people” issues and, in my reckoning, they are less likely to happen in that controlled or orchestrated environment where everything is on the clock and I am behind a public microphone.

But this is *my* heart, *my* talent, and no pastor needs to have such moments to be a pastor or to be spiritual or biblical. We don’t stand in judgment over anyone in this book. But, then again, I cannot believe I am alone.

The Day of Small Things

Someone said, “Don’t despise the day of small things? Oh, that’s right, Zechariah 4:10. The Israelites returning from Babylonian captivity were discouraged in their efforts to rebuild the Temple. There were setbacks and a mountain to move [Zechariah 4:7 compare with Mark 11:23]. But God gave the prophet this assurance: “The hands of Zerubbabel have laid the foundation of this house; his hands shall also finish it;” [Zechariah 4:9] adding “Not by might, nor by power, but by my spirit, saith the LORD of hosts.” [Zechariah 4:6].

Maybe small is big in God’s economy. Maybe foolish is wise, weak is strong, and poor is rich!

- 1 Corinthians 1:27 “God hath chosen the foolish things of the world to confound the wise; and God hath chosen the weak things of the world to confound the things which are mighty;”
- 2 Corinthians 8:2 “How that in a great trial of affliction the abundance of their joy and their deep poverty abounded unto the riches of their liberality.”
- 2 Corinthians 12:9 “my strength is made perfect in weakness. Most gladly therefore will I rather glory in my infirmities”

Epilogue

Maybe “home” gatherings, wherever they are, around the dinner table, in the church, in the basement, in the sanctuary, in a Sunday school room, in the park, at the river’s edge—wherever—in their smallness might be—in part, at least—the Spirit’s answer to reviving the Church’s significance and influence in these closing days of time.

There is probably much more to add in support of the “house church” model in the New Testament and its relevance to today’s Christian church. Persecution may be, like then, the die in the contrast that highlights the difference between living for Christ and not living for Him. If it is in God’s interest to emphasize a value to “house ministries” He will.

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Bio

Pastor King was known in Western Pennsylvania for his knowledge of Koine Greek and Classical Hebrew, having taught in Western PA Bible Institute in Butler, The Lighthouse Ministry in Washington, and Faith Seminary in Bethel Park, PA in the 1970's. He also taught at the Charismatic Conference in 1979 at Duquesne University. He graduated from a four year ministerial program at Northeast Bible College, which is now Valley Forge University, and later returned to complete a course of study for a B.S. in Bible. In 1982, he received a Master of Bible Theology from the International Bible Institute & Seminary, Pensacola, Florida.

Currently retired from the pastorate, he lives with his wife of 50 plus years in Massachusetts.

Pastor King is the author of over 30 books:

Books Written by John H. King

1. A Monologue of Life - A quick overview of my life
2. A Reasonable Salvation - Toward an explanation for Jesus' Crucifixion
3. After Eden - About the "Fall" of mankind
4. Biblical Discipleship: For New Christians - A discipling Guide
5. BROKEN BONES: Psalm 51 - On repentance and forgiveness
6. Can You see God in This Picture? - 25 years of Ministry
7. Challenged: Living Our Faith in a Postmodern Age - A Christian perspective on today's issues
8. Christian Riches: Practicing Our Faith Cautiously Within an Awareness of God's Peaceful Vigilance - All about money
9. Devotional Thoughts from God's Word - Essays on grace
10. Discipleship: Following Jesus - A dialog on bearing our cross
11. Eden - Adam and Eve and what went wrong
12. Essays in God's Righteousness Justification or Covenantal Faithfulness?
13. FINDING GOD REASONABLE - A philosophical treatise on the reasonable believer
14. Grandma's Eyes: A Grandfather's Perspective on Love - A tribute to my wife
15. I Forgive You: A Personal Journey into Forgiveness - Learning to forgive, Biblical style
16. I Remember - My early years in Buffalo
17. If It Be Possible - Did Jesus have to die?
18. Inheriting The Kingdom of Light: Essays on Heaven
19. ISAIAH AND THE SIX WOES - Prophecies for today
20. Jesus: God's Gift of Himself - All about the Cross
21. Jots and Tittles - The Language of Scripture
22. Poems & Things - Insight into "Me" through my poetry
23. Romans: Paul's Covenant Theology - A Commentary
24. Talking to God: How I Found Peace
25. The Cross: Why Jesus Had To Die
26. The Crusade For the Souls of Men: The Gospel Story: When God Walked Among Us
27. The Day After Time: God Put The 'More' in Forever
28. The Dream: A Retired Pastor Reflects on The Perfect Ministry
29. The Heart of the Matter: A Heartfelt Christianity
30. The Henotic Relationship: A Biblical Study in Oneness
31. The Suffering Servant: Isaiah's Astonishing Prophecy