True Fellowship

By Andy Foster

I want to look at an essential element of a healthy and committed body of believers. Maybe we as a church think about what church is and your role in it? What should a church look like? How should it function? No doubt as we consider these questions it conjures memories of past and present church experiences (good or bad) and a desire what could be. Some of you may have no experience in church until recently with no preconceived ideas. Many of us have looked for the perfect church – but as Spurgeon once said - “The day we find the perfect church it becomes imperfect the moment we join it.”

However, no matter the imperfections of those who make up the church, we are called to be a distinct community or fellowship. An assembly of people called out to be separate from the world, committed to Christ and to one another in love and service.

This idea of community has become a hot topic within the church because it can be so difficult to cultivate and maintain.. What is Community? What makes up a fellowship? Is it merely people meeting in the same place or who happen to know one another? Is it a group that has a common interest? Is it a group that simply likes each other and gets along? Or as too often is the case maybe we just tolerate one another?

There are all kinds of communities based on interest, obligations, or similar needs. Even if nothing else is known about one another people will gather and interact based on that common theme. We all participate in communities whether practical, necessary, or just silly. This takes all kinds of forms including the work place, clubs, collectors and hobbyist, or even a bar. Do any of those represent true fellowship?

Being from Georgia and as a Georgia Bulldog football fan, I participate in a community called Georgia nation that many Saturdays will dress in red and black, wave rally rags and pom poms, play Georgia fight songs, we eat food named after the opponent, and bark at the TV without shame. We do this with many others sharing the same belief ttat he bulldogs are worthy of our allegiance. People even schedule their life around games [wedding story]. Isn’t it interesting if not pathetic what we will align with and commit to.

As a church, does simply gathering together once a week and interacting make us a

community? . Does it translate to true fellowship?

Is our community and fellowship distinctive? What's the difference between our fellowship and that of any other group?

I would like us to consider what brings us here together and what makes our gathering unique?

Each of us is here in part this morning because we desire to be part of a group where love for one another thrives. A place where you are encouraged, supported and trusted. We desire to be around people who are committed to another in spirit and in service. We want deep meaningful relationships. However, my guess is that we have all been hurt and disappointed with those whom we call our brothers and sisters in Christ. We as Christians have too often failed. Whether the cause is hypocrisy, insensitivity, or disagreements, - personal hurt, discontentment, and even a backlash toward the church are too often the result.

The inconsistencies within the church have cultivated a distrust for absolutes and objective truth. Looking at the faults of the church, some have concluded you can't accept and trust anything about the church including the Word of God.

With a desire to create a vibrant community, and as a response to our own failings, the church has attempted to manufacture an environment where people feel safe and comfortable, and to appeal to peoples senses and appetites utilizing any means possible. All kinds of techniques and strategies are designed and carried out in the hopes of cultivating a utopia within the church.

However, in an attempt to cultivate fellowship there has been a move in the church to focus on relationships and personal fulfillment at the expense of objective Truth. p.24

Some who have promoted movements to counteract the lack of relationships have relegated objective truth as a secondary issue if even acknowledged at all.

A leader within this movement says this... "we are a home in an age of rapid transition. It's possible that a set of ideals will not ever bring us stability. Instead that assurance seems to be rooted in community, love and relationship. Imagine that! A reformation built around mission and relationship instead of thoughts, systems and ideals."

At first that may sound appealing. However, he is basically saying that assurance

cannot come from objective truth but through community and relationships.

Is that really possible? Can you have genuine fellowship without ideals, a standard or foundational truth in which there is agreement?

This concept that many in the church are adopting is reversing priorities to first "belonging" then "believing". In other words, don't let objective truth get in the way of building relationships. Some have said that we should think in terms of biblical elasticity that conforms scripture to fit today's cultural norm and one's personal experience.

When we look into scripture we see a different picture of what a healthy and committed church looks like, and where it derives it's health and growth.

Let's first look at the early church to see what model they followed.

Acts 2:42 They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship....

Devotion means to be earnest towards, to persevere, be constantly diligent, or adhere closely.

Ultimately the health of the body of Christ it is a matter of devotion and the placement of our affections. The early church was devoted to teaching of the Truth and to serving fellow believers.

Acts 2:24 They devoted themselves to the fellowship.

They were devoted to the fellowship. Fellowship in scripture describes the assembly of believers, the body of Christ, and comes from the root word – koenia - which means to partner, to intimately know, to share in common. So, true fellowship means we are partners, having a common bond in which we intimately share. That bond determines the depth and health of our fellowship and our commitment to one another in service and love..

What is that common bond? It can be nothing other than Jesus Christ. We have been called into fellowship not only with each other but with Christ Himself.

1 John 1:2–3 (NIV) The life appeared; we have seen it and testify to it, and we proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and has appeared to us. 3 We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard, so that you also may have fellowship with us. And our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ.

So indeed being devoted to one another is a good thing and essential to the growth and well being of the church. But we notice that is not the only thing they were devoted to.

Acts 2:42 They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching.

What was the early church first devoted to? To the apostles teaching. Teaching is doctrine. Doctrine is foundational beliefs, the fundamentals of our faith. We often think of doctrine as boring lectures, lifeless teaching, big words and no application. But quite the opposite is true, teaching and studying the Word of God is to be an exhilarating experience as the Holy Spirit leads us to a greater knowledge of and intimacy with God.

We are exhorted to study Scripture, to know and properly dispense doctrine.

1 Tim 4:16 Watch your life and doctrine closely. Persevere in them, because if you do, you will save both yourself and your hearers.

Doctrine is the framework of the body Christ. Without the truth holding us together and supporting and nourishing the body, the body will weaken, it's parts will atrophy and malfunction.

Our fellowship cannot be genuine or healthy unless it is built on the Word of God. Sadly the church all to easily substitutes sound doctrine with ideologies, concepts, principles and agendas that are contrary to the teachings of Christ. The church too often rests in psychology, self esteem, self help, growth strategies, entertainment, and the latest fads that appeal to the world rather than aligning with Truth.

Some in the church are replacing the authority and inerrancy of scripture with one's own experience and personal interpretation. Rather than resting on what the Word of God says, the emphasis it put on what one thinks about it. Scripture is being watered down to be no more than any other spiritual reading.

Studying and sharing God's word is not to be a boring academic exercise but an

exciting journey as we grow and share in an intimate relationship with Christ. We are to mature together in knowledge and obedience to Christ.

1 John 1:6–7 (NIV) If we claim to have fellowship with him yet walk in the darkness, we lie and do not live by the truth. 7 But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin.

Truth is essential to fellowship. We can talk about all kinds of programs, strategies and campaigns in attempt to cultivate healthy relationships and commitment, but the health of our body rests on our allegiance to Christ and His Word.

It is our relationship with Christ and His work in our lives that make fellowship possible. Consider these words from A.W. Tozer.

"*Has it ever occurred to you that one hundred pianos all tuned to the same fork are automatically tuned to each other? They are of one accord by being tuned, not to each other, but to another standard to which each one must individually bow. So one hundred worshipers meeting together, each one looking away to Christ, are in heart nearer to each other than they could possibly be were they to become "unity" conscious and turn their eyes away from God to strive for closer fellowship. Social religion is perfected when private religion is purified. The body becomes stronger as its members become healthier. The whole Church of God gains when the members that compose it become healthier. The whole Church of God gains when the members that compose it begin to seek a better and a higher life." - Tozer Quote –*

True doctrine is to intimately know Christ. Christ is our tuning fork. What tuning fork are we aligned with? If we seek to find fellowship in something other than Christ, disharmony and ineffectiveness and lack of commitment will be the result.

Let us to look now at how true doctrine - that is an intimate knowledge of Christ - plays out within the body of believers and why it is essential for real fellowship.

True Fellowship (Love & Commitment) Thrives in Truth

Paul further expands on the role of true knowledge in building a healthy fellowship of believers.

Philippians 1:9–11 (NIV) ***And this is my prayer: that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight, 10 so that you may be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless until the day of Christ, 11 filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ—to the glory and praise of God.***

We would agree with Paul's prayer and desire that our love for each other would flourish. It was Paul's prayer that the Philippians' love for other believers would abound, run over as a cup or a river overflows.

We often start with saying - "our love would abound more and more if" - then we will fill in the blank.

That blank is pretty important and has been the cause of much distress, confusion and even harm within the body of Christ. We may say our love would abound if...

...if we were more open minded, accommodating - tolerant
...If were more educated and sophisticated in our thinking
...If we shared our feelings more
...If we didn't take the Bible so literally
...if we weren't so focused on obedience to the Word
...If we just made things more comfortable and attractive
...If we just had more group hugs

Much of what we put in the blank is not a bad thing.

...if we spent more time together
...if we serve one another more
...if we listened and showed genuine compassion
...if we were less critical and more humble

Notice what Paul fills in the blank with...
And this is my prayer: that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight,"

The knowledge Paul refers to here in the intimate knowledge of Jesus Christ. That is true doctrine.

Love should be more than sentimental; it should be knowledgeable and discerning. Having genuine spiritual knowledge of God and depth of insight into His ways enables

Christians to love God and others more.

Peter also addresses this idea of knowledge in his first letter.

2 Peter 1:2–3 (NIV) Grace and peace be yours in abundance through the knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord. 3 His divine power has given us everything we need for life and godliness through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness.

"Knowledge" implies an intimate and personal relationship. Christians are urged to take advantage of the "full knowledge" available to them through Christ Jesus.

The knowledge that causes love to abound derives not from feelings, intuition, emotion, or personal experience, but only from the revealed truth, based on the Word.

True Fellowship Strives for Spiritual Excellence

Paul progresses from love which incorporates knowledge of God's truth and spiritual discernment - to spiritual excellence, which is to think and live biblically. "so that" = "in order" = continued progression.

Philippians 1:9–11 (NIV) And this is my prayer: that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight, 10 so that you may be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless until the day of Christ, 11 filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ—to the glory and praise of God.

If we break this down, we see two things.

First...true knowledge enables us to discern or approve what is best or excellent, or in other words test it's purity.

In many cases, the church has not accurately analyzed God's word and tested the accuracy of what we are doing and or rightly assessed where we should go. Many in Christian circles most well intentioned have followed all kinds of schemes to create a vibrant church. However in too many cases - Success has replaced healthy. Activity has replaced loving. Appearance has replaced authentic. Comfort has replaced

service. Tolerance has replaced absolutes.

As followers of Christ, we are to rightly interpret God's Word and follow it. If we as a body are not committed personally and corporately to knowing Christ in an intimate way which comes from the study and obedience of His Word we lose the ability to discern and approve what is best.

Philippians 1:9–11 (NIV) And this is my prayer: that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight, 10 so that you may be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless until the day of Christ, 11 filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ—to the glory and praise of God.

The **second** result of love abounding more in true knowledge is that it enables us to be "pure and blameless" - That is to have Integrity

"Pure" equates to whole or sincere thinking. While "Blameless" means without stumbling or offense which is the goal of purity and integrity.

This term for purity is only used again in **2 Peter 3:1-2 Dear friends, this is now my second letter to you. I have written both of them as reminders to stimulate you to wholesome thinking (purity).**

Whole Thinking = purity, sincerity, judged by sunlight -

"Sincere" translates to "without wax." Some pottery salesmen would use wax to cover cracks and weak places in pottery. Such a cover-up could be detected only by holding the jug up to the sun to see if any weaknesses were visible. Such a vase was "sun-judged". We are to have sun-judged hearts and minds - that is a mind consistent and aligned with truth.

The idea of sincerity carries the idea of cohesiveness, oneness, and unity. As a Christian, everything fits together - our beliefs, actions and attitudes are consistent. Nothing is unrelated to the foundation of a saving faith and holy living The practical everyday aspects of life are in complete harmony with biblical truth that lead us to spiritual disciplines such as prayer, worship, theology, morality, and serving one another.

This cohesiveness found with an intimate knowledge of Christ and His word has both

personal and corporate implications. Our sincerity on an individual basis translates a purity and strength within the community as a whole. We each have a responsibility to cultivate a fellowship that when it is held up against the light there are no cracks.

1 Tim 1:3-7 As I urged you when I went into Macedonia, stay there in Ephesus so that you may command certain men not to teach false doctrines any longer 4 nor to devote themselves to myths and endless genealogies. These promote controversies rather than God's work-which is by faith. 5 The goal of this command is love, which comes from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith. 6 Some have wandered away from these and turned to meaningless talk. 7 They want to be teachers of the law, but they do not know what they are talking about or what they so confidently affirm.

Notice that, Godly love comes from a pure heart, good conscience and sincere faith. True healthy fellowship cannot be separated from the truth found in God's word. They are intimately tied together.

True Fellowship is Expressed in Good Works

Philippians 1:9–11 (NIV) And this is my prayer: that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight, 10 so that you may be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless until the day of Christ, 11 filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ—to the glory and praise of God.

The progression continues, Godly love rooted in the knowledge of Christ produces spiritual excellence, which produces good works.

Paul prays that they woul mature in Christian service - filled with fruit. He is not interested simply in "church activities," but in the kind of spiritual fruit that is produced when we are in fellowship with Christ.

Too many times we as Christians try to "produce results" in ourown efforts instead of abiding in Christ and allowing His life to produce the fruit within us.

It's that intimate knowledge and relationship in Christ that is essential for spiritual maturity that leads to service and commitment among the saints.

John 15:4–5 (NIV) 4 Remain in me, and I will remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me. 5 "I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing.

Colossians 1:9–10 (NIV) For this reason, since the day we heard about you, we have not stopped praying for you and asking God to fill you with the knowledge of his will through all spiritual wisdom and understanding. 10 And we pray this in order that you may live a life worthy of the Lord and may please him in every way: bearing fruit in every good work, growing in the knowledge of God.

The fruit manifest in an intimate relationship with Christ and pure doctrine results in fruits of righteousness that leads to loving and committed fellowship.

True Fellowship brings Glory to God

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Lastly, a fellowship that has a love that abounds in the knowledge of Christ not only results in spiritual excellence and good works, but ultimately brings glory and praise to God. That is the ultimate purpose of our being as individuals and as body of Christ. Fellowship is ultimately not all about us but about being a light unto the world and bringing God the honor, glory and praise.

So as we consider what makes a healthy committed fellowship let us remember it cannot happen unless we are aligned together in Truth. Each of us has a responsibility to ensure our fellowship and commitment to one another rests on a maturing knowledge of Christ that is pure doctrine.

When we talk about committing to this body, we are not asking you to commit some list of regulations, requirements or special code. Our desire is that we would be committed to Christ and His Word. As we do so, true fellowship and commitment with another will happen.