Intentional Fellowship and Prayer

Teachers Intent

Christians must be intentional about fellowshipping with fellow believers and working together to accomplish God's will, and understanding the meaning of "fellowship" is key to knowing what God expects of us. Corporate prayer is a critical element of the NT church and should be regularly practiced by Christians.

[1: title]

Introduction

In our study of community so far, we started with the reality that a relationship with God is the foundation for community with one another. We then examined corporate community followed by humility, honesty, and finally love last week.

[2: outline]

Today I'd like to cover two more aspects of community: intentional fellowship and prayer.

But before I get into those topics, I want to present a brief history of Jewish public worship. We've been talking about community and we understand the local church as the mechanism for community. But we never really laid a historical foundation for "how" the local church became the focus of community.

History of Corporate Assembly

- Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible, "Synagogue" (p. 2007)
- Anchor Yale Bible Dictionary, "Synagogue" (vol. 6, p. 252)
- http://www.crivoice.org/exodusdate.html
- https://www.gci.org/law/sabbath/lev23
- https://redeeminggod.com/synagogue-church-building

[3: question]

As modern Christians, we often look back to the early church and reference how they conducted themselves as an example for how we should gather as a corporate body. But put yourself in the shoes of a group of 1st century Jewish converts to Christianity.

Question: what did these early Christians use as an example for assembling together?
Answer: the Jewish synagogue system.

[4: answer]

As you're probably aware, the Jews at the time of Christ assembled each Sabbath (Saturday) at the local synagogue, which was pretty much their version of a church. At their synagogue service, they would recite common prayers, read Scripture, and have a period of teaching or reflection on the sermon. But nowhere did God command the Jews to assemble together each Sabbath as a corporate body. You see, God commanded the Israelites to keep the Sabbath day holy by not working on it.

[5: question]

Question: Why did the Jews start assembling on Sabbaths to have corporate worship?
Answer: the first temple was destroyed in 586 BC.

[6: answer]

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In order to answer the question "why", we need to understand a little bit about the Jewish religious system in the OT. Early Jewish religious life primarily revolved around the sacrificial ceremonies conducted at the Temple in Jerusalem, with teaching the Scriptures being mostly a family matter (Deuteronomy 6:6-7). We don't find a pattern of regular, weekly assembly for worship, outside of the prescribed annual festivals.

The Jews were commanded to present themselves at the Temple and offer a sacrifice to God three times a year at the festivals of Passover, Pentecost, and Tabernacles (Exodus 34:18-23). Outside of those major events, the religious duties of the nation were kept by the Levites (the priests) as they conducted daily sacrifices at the Temple.

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However, when the First Temple was destroyed and the Jews were taken captive into Babylon in 586 BC, they could no longer practice their religion the way they had because they didn't have a temple to offer sacrifices. It was at this time that scholars believe the synagogue system began to take root, as a portable way to meet the Jews' religious needs apart from the Temple.

Even after the Temple was rebuilt, many Jews continued to remain in Babylon because that's where they had been born or made a life for themselves. So it seems that the synagogue system became prevalent originally as a matter of necessity but transformed into a matter of convenience as Jewish religious life shifted from the Temple and the family to the synagogue.

The synagogue became the central means of studying Scripture, praying, and fellowshipping during the Exile period, and this practice carried over into the time of the NT.

By the time of Christ, the synagogue was a critical element of Jewish religious life, and it is recorded that Jesus and the disciples regularly attended the local synagogue each Sabbath as was expected of a good Jew.

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It's interesting to note that if a Jewish community was just starting out or was too poor to build a synagogue building, they would actually meet in each others houses a few times a week, often around meals to conduct prayer and reading of the Scriptures. That sounds a lot like what we find recorded about the early Christian church. They didn't invent "house churches", they merely adopted what they already knew because almost all of the early Christians were Jews.

With that interesting historical aside, I want to introduce the first of our two main topics: intentional fellowship.

Intentional Fellowship

- The Compelling Community, Mark Dever and Jamie Dunlop
- https://bible.org/seriespage/3-importance-fellowship-new-testament-church
- https://bible.org/article/christian-fellowship

[10: question]

Question: What does "fellowship" mean to you?

Relationship vs Fellowship

[11]

Sometimes people use the word "relationship" in place of "fellowship", but these are two distinct things. People will say things like "how is your relationship with God?" But most of the time what they're really asking is "how is your fellowship with God?"

A relationship is the state of how two things are connected. In the context of Christianity, our relationship with God is something we're born into by accepting Christ's sacrifice, whereas fellowship is something we choose to actively participate in.

Another way of describing it is a relationship is passive; you can still have it without doing anything. Fellowship, on the other hand, requires action. As an example, how many of you actively chose to be related to your biological parents?

You and I have a relationship with God because we have been "born again" into the family of God. By extension, we are spiritually "related" to every other believer because they have also been born into God's family. Literally speaking, in God's eyes, you and I are brothers and sisters. Often we use those terms metaphorically, but spiritually speaking it's entirely accurate.

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	John 1:12-13
12	Yet to all who did receive Him, to those who believed in His name, He gave the right to become children of God —
13	children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God.

	Romans 8:14-15b, 17a (Galatians 4:7)
14	For those who are led by the Spirit of God are the children of God.
15	...the Spirit you received brought about your adoption to sonship. And by him we cry, "Abba (Aramaic for *father*), Father."
17	Now if we are children, then we are heirs — heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ...

So when folks ask how our relationship with God is, our response should be: "it hasn't changed!" We are still members of God's family, adopted and sealed by the Holy Spirit living within us.

Definition of Fellowship

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When you encounter the word "fellowship" in the NT text, most of the time it roughly means "holding something in common", "partner", "participant" or "associate."

English	**Greek**	**Meaning**	**In NT**
fellowship	*koinonia*	Holding something in common, partner, participant, associate	19x

We find it used in the NT Scripture in a few different ways:

	Luke 5:10 (referencing fishing)
10	and so were James and John, the sons of Zebedee, Simon's partners (koinonia).

	2 Corinthians 8:23
23	As for Titus, he is my partner (koinonia) and co-worker among you; as for our brothers, they are representatives of the churches and an honor to Christ.

	2 Peter 1:4
4	Through these he has given us his very great and precious promises, so that through them you may participate (koinonia) in the divine nature, having escaped the corruption in the world caused by evil desires.

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We see that "fellowship" isn't the same as hanging out with our friends and having a good time. Instead, fellowship involves the idea that we are partners in a business, actively working towards a common goal. It's not about "being together" but rather "doing together."

[15: question]

But this begs the question, "what is it we are doing as Christian fellowshippers?"

[16: answer]

Well, if we are members of God's family, what we're participating in (or fellowshipping in) is the family business of reflecting God to the world so that the Gospel will spread.

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	1 Corinthians 1:9
9	God is faithful, who has called you into fellowship (koinonia) with his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.

	Philemon 6

6	I pray that your partnership (koinonia) with us in the faith may be effective in deepening your understanding of every good thing we share for the sake of Christ.

	Ephesians 3:9-11
9	...to make plain to everyone the administration of this mystery (Gospel), which for ages past was kept hidden in God, who created all things.
10	His intent was that now, through the church, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms,
11	according to his eternal purpose that he accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord.

With that in mind, one way to define Christian fellowship is:

Definition of "Christian Fellowship"
Inner unity among believers that expresses itself in outer participation with Christ in reflecting God and spreading the Gospel.

This is our fundamental purpose as the church on this earth.

Foundation of Fellowship

Just because we know the objective doesn't mean we're actually accomplishing it.

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The foundation of our fellowship as a church is our individual fellowship with God. And the primary means of fellowship with God is through:

1. Reading and studying the Scriptures (2 Timothy 2:15; 3:15-17)
2. Praying (Mark 1:35; Luke 5:16)
3. Listening to the leading of the Holy Spirit (John 16:13)

If we don't base our fellowship with believers first on our fellowship with Christ, that's kind of like saying you know someone because others tell you things about that person. If you only get to know Christ through other believers, you're missing out. Because you can't have an intimate relationship with someone you don't personally know.

May I suggest, then, that reading devotional books or books "about" the Bible should never replace "reading" the Bible.

Doing Fellowship Together

If we establish our foundation for Christian fellowship by first fellowshipping with God, how do we effectively fellowship with other believers? Another way of phrasing that is how do we work together with our brothers and sisters in Christ to share the Gospel?

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There are two primary ways in which we can practice fellowship with each other, and I submit to you all that it's a lot simpler than some may think:

1. Discipling fellow believers
2. Showing hospitality both inside and outside the church

Note that neither one of these demands that you are telling every unbeliever you come across that Jesus died for them and that if you don't push them to accept Christ right then-and-there that you've somehow failed. Instead, we need to understand that we each have a role in evangelism and that it is a process, not a singular event.

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	1 Corinthians 3:5-9
5	What, after all, is Apollos? And what is Paul? Only servants, through whom you came to believe—as the Lord has assigned to each his task.
6	I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God has been making it grow.
7	So neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but only God, who makes things grow.
8	The one who plants and the one who waters have one purpose, and they will each be rewarded according to their own labor.
9	For we are co-workers in God's service; you are God's field, God's building.

Here we see that sharing the Gospel is viewed like a plant that is nurtured by several different people. Eventually, one of the caretakers "reaps the harvest" so to speak, and someone accepts Christ as their Savior, but there are oftentimes many people involved in that person's life.

Discipling

[22: question]

If I were to ask each of you if you think you disciple others, what would you say? I think there is a fear among Christians that we aren't adequate or equipped to disciple others, and many shirk away at the thought of it because we have a narrow definition of discipleship.

[23: answer]

Discipleship is the process of helping others become more like Christ. Sometimes that involves teaching. Sometimes that involves listening. Other times it may involve confronting in love.

May I submit that if you have encouraged someone recently in their faith that you have actually discipled them? Sometimes we turn discipleship into something much more formal than it really is.

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- Talk to others about what you've been reading in the Scriptures
- Tell others what God has been doing in your life
- Share what the Holy Spirit has been laying on your heart lately
- Encourage someone going through a difficult trial or come alongside them and lend a hand.

That's discipleship in a nutshell. Don't overthink it or convince yourself you aren't capable of doing it.

Hospitality

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Besides discipleship, another way of fellowshipping is through hospitality. Now I'm using this as a general word to encompass a wide variety of things, such as:

- Meeting the financial needs of a fellow believer, but viewed as a re-allocation of the resources of our corporate enterprise. It's not "me" giving something to someone "else" and patting myself on the back. It's "me" taking care of my fellow partner so we are both better able to carry out our task of spreading the Gospel and reflecting Christ.
- Opening the doors of your house to visiting believers. View it as cutting costs in your corporation by saving on housing.
- Spending time with those who are hurting. If you have an injury, you typically don't ignore it. You take care of it so it can heal and get back to full use. Christians are all

part of the body of Christ and we each have different functions. But when you help other believers, don't view it as "I'm" giving up "my" time for this person, view it as I'm taking care of my body, because we are united in Christ.

- General outreach in the community such as filling bags with food for children, or giving clothing to the homeless. CFC is currently collecting bags of food. I encourage you to stop by the foyer and pick a bag and fill it up.

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You may be thinking, huh, there's nothing really deep or mysterious here. And that's exactly right. Fellowshipping as Christians doesn't require some deep theological understanding or amazing social or rhetorical skills.

If you think that you can't participate in the body of Christ effectively because you aren't good enough or smart enough or skilled enough, may I suggest that the Enemy has you exactly where he wants you: disagreeing with God about what He has equipped you for in His body called the church.

	Romans 12:4-6b
4	For just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function,
5	so in Christ we, though many, form one body, and each member belongs to all the others.
6b	We have different gifts, according to the grace given to each of us.

God has given each of us gifts and abilities to use in His church. Sometimes they may not always be easy to find, but they're there.

Prayer in Community

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So we've looked at fellowship as the intentional partnering together to share the Gospel through discipling believers and demonstrating hospitality. What I want to look at briefly now is prayer as part of our function as the body of Christ.

One of the interesting things about the Lord's Prayer in Matthew 6:9-13 is the very first line:

"Give us this day our daily bread…"

Does anything stand out to you about that first sentence? It's plural. Christ's pattern for prayer uses a plural format.

In the book of Acts we find the apostles and early church praying together several times:

Acts 1:14a	They all joined together constantly in prayer...
Acts 2:42	They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.
Acts 6:4	[we] (apostles) will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word.

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This isn't to say that corporate prayer is intrinsically somehow more powerful than individual prayer or that we should spend more time praying with others than by ourselves. Rather, it's to demonstrate that we should pray as both an individual and a corporate body.

But some of you may be thinking to yourselves at the moment, hey, Dan, what about the passage in Matthew 18 where Christ says where 2 or more are gathered in My name there I am also? Doesn't that state that corporate prayer has some power to it that individual prayer does not?

Good question, and thank you for asking it! I want to take a moment and address one of the most commonly misinterpreted passages in Scripture.

	Matthew 18:19-20
19	"Again, truly I tell you that if two of you on earth agree about anything they ask for, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven.
20	For where two or three gather in my name, there am I with them."

Well this seems pretty clear, doesn't it? I mean, how is this confusing in the least? Christ is saying that where two or more are gathered in His name, there He is with them.

If you've been at CFC for any period of time, you've heard Pastor Brian say real-estate is all about what? Location, location, location. And the Scripture is all about what? Context, context, context.

Another fancy saying is that "a text without a context is a pretext". Meaning if we don't let the Scripture speak for Itself, we end up making It say things It never intended to say, and then we start living ways God never intended us to live.

Let's look at this passage in context.

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	Matthew 18:15-20
15	"If your brother or sister sins, go and point out their fault, just between the two of you. If they listen to you, you have won them over.
16	But if they will not listen, take one or two others along, so that 'every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.' (Deuteronomy 19:15)
17	If they still refuse to listen, tell it to the church; and if they refuse to listen even to the church, treat them as you would a pagan or a tax collector.
18	"Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.
19	"Again, truly I tell you that if two of you on earth agree about anything they ask for, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven.
20	For where two or three gather in my name, there am I with them."

The context of this passage is dealing with a brother or sister who has sinned against you. Initially, we are to go alone to that person and confront them. If they refuse to repent and resolve the issue, we are commanded to come back with others as objective witnesses to establish the facts. Verse 16 actually quotes from Deuteronomy 19:15, which regulates legal practices of the nation of Israel:

	Deuteronomy 19:15
15	One witness is not enough to convict anyone accused of any crime or offense they may have committed. A matter must be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.

In context, Christ is saying that when you follow the proper procedure of confronting someone who has done you wrong, Christ will stand behind you when you confront that individual with the backing of other witnesses. It is basically Christ saying He puts His stamp of approval on this procedure if the proper steps were followed. It really has absolutely nothing to do with prayer.

Going beyond the context and the quotes from the OT, we also have to address the theological question that's presented if Christ only listens when 2 or more are praying. Does God not listen when I'm praying by myself?

You see, this goes back to we need to be in the Word ourselves, not just accepting what others tell us.

I want to quickly cover a few things about prayer. This is by no means exhaustive.

Pray Proactively, not Reactively

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First, don't use prayer as a reaction to ask God to fix things. We should be praying proactively ahead of time. You often hear that "an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure." This principle is true of prayer as well. Don't wait until life gets hard to involve God; He wants to be involved from the beginning.

	James 4:2b-3
2b	You do not have because you do not ask God.
3	When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your pleasures.

Pray for Each Other

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Second, pray for each other. We are to pray for each other on a continual basis. This means we are to have a lifestyle of prayer, not an action of prayer.

	1 Timothy 2:1
1	I urge, then, first of all, that petitions, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving be made for all people.

	Ephesians 6:18-20
18	And pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the Lord's people.
19	Pray also for me, that whenever I speak, words may be given me so that I will fearlessly make known the mystery of the gospel,
20	for which I am an ambassador in chains. Pray that I may declare it fearlessly, as I should.

Pray to Worship, not just to Ask

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Many of us have the “asking” part of prayers down. We love asking God for things, and we are commanded to do so. But how often do we start our prayers with adoring God for Who He is and worshipping Him? Not just thanking Him for saving us or what He’s done for us, but just worshipping Him for being Him.

This is something that King David did very well. Read this prayer of praise he made when he was dedicating his son Solomon to be the next king who would build the First Temple:

	1 Chronicles 29:10-13
10	Praise be to you, Lord, the God of our father Israel, from everlasting to everlasting.
11	Yours, Lord, is the greatness and the power and the glory and the majesty and the splendor, for everything in heaven and earth is yours. Yours, Lord, is the kingdom; you are exalted as head over all.
12	Wealth and honor come from you; you are the ruler of all things. In your hands are strength and power to exalt and give strength to all.
13	Now, our God, we give you thanks, and praise your glorious name.

Keep in mind, we’ve been talking about fellowship with God, and David was called a man after God’s own heart (Acts 13:22, Paul addressing Jews).

You may think that these 3 points are kind of simple: and that’s the point. You don’t need some elaborate 5-step process or class to learn how to pray. You just need to start praying as a function of the body of Christ.

On Wednesday nights, there’s a class called “Simply Pray” that does exactly what the name sounds like. If you have time on Wednesday evenings at 7pm, I encourage you to attend.

Summary

[33]

Christian Fellowship...	**Prayer...**
Is a partnership	Pray proactively, not reactively
“Family business” is reflecting God and sharing the Gospel	Pray for each other
Foundation is Relationship with Christ	Pray as an act of worship, not just requests
Disciples church through teaching and encouraging	
Demonstrates hospitality both inside and outside the church	
Is simpler than many think	

Conclusion

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I want to finish up today by challenging us with some practical applications. You may have felt that we didn’t cover as much new and insightful information today as you wish we had. Maybe you wanted some more Greek, some more history, or some more facts.

But that was intentional. What we covered today is the basics of Christian life: read your Bible, pray, and fellowship together. There’s no reason to try and make that more complex than it needs to be.

I’m reminded of the account of Naaman in 2 Kings 5:1-19. Naaman was a Syrian general who became a leper. He had obtained a Jewish girl as a slave, and she told him about the prophet Elisha who was a man of God who could heal Naaman.

The king of Syria sent Naaman to the king of Israel with a lot of money and a letter asking the king of Israel to heal Naaman. Now it’s kind of comical looking back at this, because the Scriptures record that the king of Israel got scared and said “Am I God? Can I kill and bring back

to life? Why does this fellow send someone to me to be cured of his leprosy?" (2 Kings 5:7), because he thought that the Syrians were trying to pick a fight with him.

But Naaman eventually met the prophet Elisha and asked him to heal his leprosy. What's fascinating, is that Elisha told Naaman to take a dip in the filthy Jordan River seven times, and then his leprosy would be healed.

Naaman refused in contempt, and decided he was going home to Syria where he had clean rivers to bathe in. But one of his servants made a very astute observation in verse 13: "If the prophet had told you to do some great thing, would you not have done it? How much more, then, when he tells you, 'Wash and be cleansed'!"

You see, Naaman was prepared to do the greatest and mightiest of tasks to merit healing: everything except humble himself and do the simplest of things. Literally walk into some dirty water a few times and be healed of a life-threatening disease.

If you told a cancer patient that's all they had to do to be healed, why would they prefer chemotherapy and radiation treatments to that?

But how many times do we act like Naaman in our Christian lives? We think that the latest book or devotional or study will improve our Christian life. Or that if we meet in small groups instead of a larger group we'll finally unlock the mystery of being a super-Christian. Or if we just learned Hebrew and Greek then we'd finally "really" know how to be a good Christian.

But realize that there weren't magical properties in the Jordan River that healed Naaman's disease. There was an infinite, loving God behind it Who healed Naaman. In the same way, we don't change into perfect people through our own acts: God is the One Who changes us, and He has seen fit to use reading the Scriptures, prayer, and fellowship as His means of changing our lives.

I have 2 things I want us to think about as we practically apply what we've covered today.

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Application: Praise God in Prayer

First, sometime this week, I recommend that each to take a few moments and pray a prayer of praise to God. Not asking Him for anything, but just worshipping Who He is. Pick some attribute about God and worship Him for it.

Application: Read the Bible

Second, I strongly recommend that each of us choose a book of the Bible and read it before the end of the month. It can be any book you want, short or long. But just read it. Most books in the Bible can be read in 30 minutes to 2 hours. But just read the Scriptures. I'm not telling you to not read about the history or background, but I am saying read the Scriptures themselves.

And then tell someone about what you read and what you thought about it. It's literally as simple as saying "hey, Jason, I was just reading in the book of Matthew, and I thought it was really cool that Jesus fed 5,000 people while giving a sermon on a mount. It's interesting that He met both their physical needs as well as their spiritual needs." But just share what you read with a fellow believer.

This accomplishes fellowship with God through reading His Word, as well as fellowship with another believer as we encourage and lift one another up.

The intent is not for us to check up on each other or scrutinize our spiritual lives, but rather for us to edify and build one another up.

Because if we're not doing something about all the stuff we're learning here in Relevant and CFC, then we're wasting our time. As the Scriptures say in James 1:22, we need to be doers of the Word and not merely hearers.