

Enjoying Fellowship with the Family of God

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DWINDLING FELLOWSHIP

I. THE FELLOWSHIP PRINCIPLE

“No man is an island entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main...” John Donne’s words are as easily used to describe death as any separation. Young lovers feel sharply the pain of separation. Old lovers feel it even more strongly. Human beings are not meant to be alone. God created heaven, earth and all of earth’s inhabitants and said, “It is very good” (Gen. 1:31). The first thing that was not good was man’s loneliness (Gen. 2:18). This loneliness is eased with our relationship to God and with our relationship to others. As Edwin Lewis points out, “God’s expectation from men is for sonship and brotherhood...Not to be to God as a son, and not to be to other men as a brother – that is what Jesus described as sin” (Warren 39). Our happiness on earth and our eternal destiny hinge not only upon our relationship to God, but on our actions towards fellow Christians, friends, neighbors, associates and even complete strangers. As if this were not enough, the relationships enjoyed by Christians have another layer of meaning and purpose. Jesus told His disciples, “By this all men will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another” (John 13:35). [All Scripture references are

taken from the New American Standard Bible unless otherwise noted.] Our obligation to God, to our brothers and sisters in Christ, and to those we attempt to reach with the gospel is to do our very best to foster Christian fellowship. This can take place by helping within the fellowship structure and activities the elders have put into place or by helping to foster Christian relationships individually.

Cultivating fellowship is a scary task. This word rolls the fears of evangelism, church and a first date into one intimidating activity. The fear of rejection, the lack of time, the feelings of helplessness and inexperience all keep our mouths closed until we forget we can open them. We forget that companionship (which is, in truth, the heart of fellowship) is a feeling human beings desire more than most other things. We want to help our friends. We want to laugh and joke with people. We want to be considered a thoughtful, kind and caring person. And, whether we will admit it or not, we want to be the person someone counts on when trouble strikes or a plaguing dilemma comes knocking. Why do we hedge? Why do we hesitate, when we know what we want and what our friends want? We waver because, as someone has said, "trying is the first step toward failure" (Henderson xxxv).

II. THE FELLOWSHIP PRACTICE

Fear is an effective motivational tool. So is happiness. Psychological tests have used these two stimuli for decades in animals, and we are no different in regard to these tools. As much as humans fear failure, we need to realize two things that most animals in cages will never consider:

A. We have Overcome Setbacks Before

However far you have come in life, Failure and Obstacle have been your constant companions. The question is whether or not you have listened to them. There were times you ignored Failure and walked all over Obstacle to reach something that was important to you. The Chinese proverb rings all too clear in parts of our lives, *"Failure is not falling down but refusing to get up."* The opportunity to have true friends to count on and to be the friend you can be is worth the risk of trying, even if there are setbacks.

B. Fear Is a Small Price to Pay for Happiness

The fact that we have all overcome obstacles is not news. The question is whether fellowship is an area worth the effort, the time and the setbacks. In a moment it will become shockingly clear that many Americans are dying of loneliness. However, even knowing the effort is worth it, attitude changes nothing. It does not change what you have done. It does not change anyone's relationship with you or with God. Changing your attitude is stopping too short.

Actions change everything. While your actions may not change a given person on a given day, your actions in regard to fellowship will have as long-lasting a benefit as anything else you can do. Christ says it identifies you; Paul says it encourages you and those around you. Modern science agrees as well.

III. THE FELLOWSHIP OF PEOPLE

A casual modern reader, after paging through the stories of the Bible, would be as staggered by the relationships between humans as they are by the great God humans serve. In a nomadic society, "All the persons

belonging to Jacob, who came to Egypt, his direct descendants, not including the wives of Jacob's sons, were sixty-six persons in all" (Gen. 46:26). Paul writes a letter to the church at Rome and greets 28 people by name, along with four groups in his concluding remarks. This is notable only because Paul had never even been to Rome. By comparison, modern Americans are more like the Prodigal Son: lonely and disconnected.

A. The Search for Real Relationships

Even with the internet, the recent surge in social websites, cell phones and text messaging, people are more isolated than even 20 years ago. A 2006 article in the Washington Post states, "A quarter of Americans say they have no one with whom they can discuss personal troubles, more than double the number who were similarly isolated in 1985. Overall, the number of people Americans have in their closest circle of confidants has dropped from around three to about two" (Vedantam A03). This fact has implications all the way from hurricane preparation to hospital stays to babysitting to the church pew. Twenty-five percent of Americans have no one to talk to about personal troubles? The opportunity for evangelism inherent in fellowship is staggering! By emphasizing fellowship and worship, the church can meet a need that is not being met at all in the lives of one out of every four people. An increase in commuting, financial pressure and the changing social climate are all factors, but one thing is certain: People need relationships. "The magnitude of risk associated with social isolation is comparable with that of cigarette smoking" (House 273-274).

B. The Sacrifice in a Real Relationship

Relationships, like anything in life, require a certain amount of sacrifice. Even when we commit to making friendship with fellow Christians a priority, we still must learn to budget time for these friendships in our already over-crowded schedules. Realistically, we might not be able to cut down our activity load. Instead, why not include people in those activities that are already part of the schedule? Friendship does require sacrifice of time and of energy. It takes time to call and arrange, time to drive, time to prepare, and energy we sometimes feel we can not muster. The additional worry is also a sacrifice. Few wives and mothers are happy with the cleanliness of their own homes, regardless of what their husbands think. The host is rarely as happy as he should be with the quality of the meal or the elegance of the display. As time passes and the relationship gets stronger, these worries may diminish, but they will always exist.

There are also sacrifices in personal privacy and intimacy. When friends join you and your spouse on a planned movie night, it changes the dynamic. This can be problematic even if the arrangement is monthly. Many times, these arrangements take more money than the same activities alone. When first getting to know someone, hot dogs and chips may not seem appropriate. But one shouldn't become overburdened with the need to impress. Hot dogs from the grill seasoned with great conversation between friends can be even more fun than a fancy, expensive meal. As Aesop once said, "A crust eaten in peace is better than a banquet partaken in anxiety." Humans often become subconsciously competitive trying to impress their friends and acquaintances. When the

budget is tight, people may neglect to entertain because of embarrassment. We shouldn't let this become the case.

There are many reasons not to spend time with people individually, collectively or in small groups. It may take more time, energy and money. It may take away some privacy and intimacy. Add to this the increase of "traffic" in the home, the general disruption and the aforementioned fear, and there are many reasons not to work hard on building these relationships. However, there are so many good reasons to make fellowship an integral part of life. The difficulties are obvious and must be considered, but the answer should be equally obvious.

DIVIDING FELLOWSHIP

In this article, we will draw some rather subjective lines. These lines must exist, or else the issue of fellowship becomes unmanageable: the solutions, problems and obstacles for one fellowship opportunity do not apply to another. For this reason, I have chosen some of the more common distinguishing characteristics and grouped them together.

"Corporate Fellowship" will be the first listed group. Corporate Fellowship is any fellowship opportunity that is sponsored or hosted by the church and where all of the members of the church, visitors, family, friends and strangers are encouraged to come. Yes, strangers can come to any event, but corporate events are where *everyone* is *invited* and *encouraged* to attend. Compare the Sunday morning worship service to a men's retreat. At a men's retreat, a visitor can come, but the focus is not on the visitor. The focus is on the defined group. Visitors are a special occurrence.

The second group to be discussed is Organized Fellowship. This would be fellowship that could be

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sponsored and hosted by a congregation, and where several of the members are in attendance. A men's or ladies' retreat, summer camp, teen lock-ins, devotionals and the like would be prime examples. The main differences between corporate and organized fellowship are the number of people and, possibly, the amount of organization and exclusivity of the events.

The third division, while actually a sub-point of Organized Fellowship, is Individual Fellowship. Church sponsorship and oversight would reach the lowest point here simply because there are too many "moving parts." The elders, deacons and preachers would provide the best oversight more by being the best examples than by organizing and facilitating. While some oversight is beneficial, this is fellowship that is vastly more personal in nature, both in organization and responsibility. This is what one would more naturally call, instead of fellowship, friendship.

I. CORPORATE FELLOWSHIP

The warm summer day of a church picnic is an excellent opportunity for fellowship and a wonderful chance for building memories. The uplifting singing during the worship service, partaking of the Lord's Supper and studying the Word of God together has no equal in fellowship on earth, when everything goes well. The fellowship opportunities during group gatherings are numerous, deep, far reaching and irreplaceable. Naming the fellowship that happens within the worship setting "corporate" places a cold feeling on something that, at its best, is far from cold.

Our goal is not to replace the worship or to change the way we worship God, but to use the time we have to

fulfill the two-fold purpose for assembling: worship and fellowship (Acts 20:7; Heb. 10:25).

A. Fellowship within the Worship Service

The churches of Christ are well known for the time and effort *we* have put forth to make sure worship is conducted in the way God would want. Christians everywhere should be very grateful for the efforts of so many. Worship not done as God directs is not acceptable or pleasing to God.

In the same way, gathering together for worship is also time for fellowship (the second purpose for assembling). Let us not be found guilty of limiting one purpose to emphasize another. After all, it is not a case of either/or—either we worship God correctly or we enjoy fellowship during the worship service. Both can be done and both must be done. It is imperative that the elders, deacons and preachers of our congregations attempt to discover the best way to assemble for worship that does not exclude or limit fellowship. “In all things, we must be sure our effort and attempt is to glorify God and to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace” (Hogan 63).

1. Types of Fellowship within the Worship Service

There are three main parts to most worship services conducted in the churches of Christ. The chief part is worship in its five major components, though the times before and after services have also been included because these are moments filled with fellowship opportunities. Even though we don’t often think of it, there are additions to the worship service that should be considered as well.

i) The Acts of Worship

The easiest thing to do with the worship service is to plan out a method and then leave the method in place indefinitely. The more difficult way would be to decide what is most appropriate for the situation under consideration and plan appropriately, while maintaining order and structure. Obviously, remaking the wheel every week is not a wise use of time. We should, however, strive to integrate more of a feeling of fellowship in the worship services.

If we decided to look for ways in our worship service to make the church behave as a community of believers and less as individual Christians, how would we progress? For the most part, we are individual Christians worshipping in one place for convenience. If everyone in the pews disappeared, how drastically would your worship change? The Lord's Supper would not change at all. The sermon, prayers and giving would not be affected. Only the singing would be affected, though mostly in volume.

The Bible speaks of the church as a family and a body—things that are drastically changed when parts are missing (cf. Gal. 4; 1 Cor. 12). A simple idea would be to have everyone hold hands standing in a circle around a section of pews, sing a verse of a closing song and then have a man say a closing prayer from the edge of the circle. Is it a small change? Yes. But each Christian will spend the entire song looking at the people, rather than at a book, a PowerPoint slide, the song leader or the ceiling. The exact same scenario could be used for the Lord's Supper. The assistants could stand at four cardinal points and pass each of the trays along the circle. The details are not significant because building design and capacity would require unique solutions and ideas. The important element is that

people be allowed the opportunity to worship God and have fellowship with one another. So, while examples are helpful, the leadership at each congregation must do what fits best.

ii) The Bookends of Worship

One of the greatest opportunities for relationship building is the time before and after worship—the “bookend” section, if you will. As people enter, leave and linger, they are looking for opportunities to talk and get to know their brothers and sisters in Christ. We have a golden opportunity to provide them with the chance to do just that. Yes, there are many whose only concern is to make it to a favorite restaurant or recliner as soon as possible, but efforts to increase fellowship during these times will only encourage members to spend time together.

A situation that often arises in congregations both warm and cold is how to treat visitors. The desire to talk to them is tempered by our desire to not smother them. One way to help with this difficulty is to break the congregation up into teams or sections to visit. The exact method, size of the group, and “shift duration” would be handled by individual congregations, but a situation like this one would both alleviate guilt and ignite individual responsibilities. If many people were asked to help in this way, it would not always be a person in a tie greeting the visitor, but someone probably dressed more like the visitor. Many people should be asked and encouraged to take part in greeting visitors. It shouldn’t always be a man in a tie. Be sure to get your teens and young adults involved in this as well. A diversity of people ensures visitors will meet someone with whom they relate.

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Even in the perfect situation where the people are not overbearing but very friendly, there is nothing to do except talk. One way to improve on this is to have an easily accessible room that can be converted into a comfortable “Coffee Shoppe.” Juice, coffee and quick snacks could be donated, as well as religious books, magazines, articles, Bible class materials or more general reading material (such as Reader’s Digest) to be rotated on a monthly basis. This area could become a hub of fellowship, as well as a place for private Bible studies, small-group meetings and as a gathering place after and between services.

The idea employed is not as important as the problem that could be solved: Christians often only see each other on Sundays and, generally, they talk standing or walking out to their cars. A way for Christians to interact while seated comfortably in cozy surroundings would allow them to converse more easily and about more than the typical generalities.

iii) Additions to Worship

While we don’t think of it as an addition to the worship service, most churches have an announcement period. This is solely focused on fellowship. While it is superfluous, many congregations have a “meet and greet” opportunity at the beginning of the worship service. This is done to promote fellowship and remove a bit of the formality at the beginning of the worship service. Churches have been known to do a great many things to achieve this same goal—singing happy birthday to an older member, or having a variety of people (approved in advance) make announcements particularly suited to them. A church could put up a suggestion box for songs to sing, Scriptures to read or sermon ideas. The song leader

could even announce on occasion the source of the selected song.

As before, the ideas are not as important as the search for the best way in various circumstances to promote fellowship and unity. The ideas one church would never dream of using might be exactly what would work in a different place. However, it must be understood that nothing is being suggested that does not already have a counterpart in the present method of worship in most churches of Christ.

2. Benefits of Fellowship within the Worship Service

There are many benefits to fellowship within the worship service. True fellowship abounds when the leaders of the congregation work in advance to make the worship service acceptable to God and beneficial to His children. Considering the hundreds of man-hours that are invested in attending the worship service, and the great opportunity to build relationships that will last for eternity, it is essential to use the worship service to the fullest.

One of the benefits of the worship service is seen especially in the new or weak member. The opportunities are unparalleled in corporate worship for one to see new faces and meet new friends. New Christians may feel intimidated in unfamiliar surroundings, especially if they are required to do something extra. Under ideal circumstances, new or shy members can become familiar with the current members without any added strain or embarrassment.

The corporate worship service is easily the most accepted time for fellowship and, as such, is an irreplaceable tool for the life of the congregation and for

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the individual. This is the time when Christians are already gathered together for worshiping God. They are already spending this time together. It is an ideal time to promote fellowship even further.

Often, life is so busy that many Christians have to literally carve out the time for worship. While there are many advantages to fellowship opportunities outside of worship, the chance to get everyone together as a group for encouragement cannot be overlooked. The students and alumni of Christian schools will agree that having the entire group together for a period of worship is irreplaceable. Many people work evenings, afternoons, nights, overtime and swing shift. However, many people have Sunday as a built-in day off and most churches have reasonable worship times to allow the majority of people to attend, even those with difficult schedules.

3. Drawbacks to Fellowship within the Worship Service

With all of the advantages, there is a drawback to consider as well. In the case of worship, this does not invalidate worship as an opportunity for fellowship, but the leaders of a congregation need to take it into account when planning fellowship opportunities in the other areas. In this way, they can make up for the inherent drawback to the fellowship that takes place during the worship service.

Since the focus of the worship service is on worshiping God, Christian fellowship will be a secondary purpose. The phrase “quality time” has been used for years in reference to a family’s attempt to focus attention on the members of the family and not on surrounding things. The worship service is not “quality time” for fellowship, nor should it be. This is not the time for focusing on Christian fellowship, but Christian worship.

4. Obstacles to Fellowship within the Worship Service

A drawback is an inherent negative in regard to fellowship, while an obstacle is a difficulty in the process of fellowship that can be reasonably overcome. The traveling portion of a retreat is an obstacle. It does not need to be a drawback, and it cannot be feasibly eliminated.

One of the obstacles to fellowship in the worship setting is the traditionally “forward-focused” worship style. At any given moment, the worshipper’s attention is on one person, whether that be the song leader, preacher, prayer leader or other leading individual. This is the optimal way to maintain focus during the worship service and would be very difficult to change on a permanent basis. Occasionally, however, the leadership could change the worship away from the forward-focused base.

Another obstacle plaguing many churches is the small circle of involvement in the worship service. There are very few individuals who lead in worship, especially in any given week. While there are people who do not want to take part, and their wishes should be honored, there are many members who may simply be overlooked. Our fellowship with each other is based upon our relationship to God. It is important to foster that relationship at every opportunity, especially when those individuals can lead the church in worshiping God.

B. Fellowship As an Extension of the Worship Service

In the hectic times in which we live, there are so few opportunities to plan an event with the full knowledge that very few people will have other obligations. Even when dealing with three people, scheduling is always as

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big of a concern as anything else. It is no wonder, then, that one of the major opportunities for fellowship is immediately before or after worship.

Apparently, fellowship around a common meal was done in the first century and was spoken against because of abuse (Jude 12; 1 Cor. 11:20-22). And fellowship connected with worship is spoken of at least twice in the book of Acts (2:42; 20:11). This type of gathering is designed solely for fellowship and is used to good effect in Biblical times and today.

1. Types of Fellowship As an Extension of the Worship Service

Fellowship as an extension of worship is most easily seen in the fellowship meals many churches have on a regular basis. These could be expanded on occasion to include “congratulations” meals or events. This could be attached to fellowship meals, but it would not be necessary. Things like anniversaries, promotions at work, end-of-year school celebrations and graduations, Bible class memory work awards, and the like would all be great opportunities to learn more about the celebrated people. Times like these are not only times of fellowship, but of celebration, affirmation and encouragement.

For many members, Sunday is the only time they study the Bible and, honestly, the sermon is always the edge of the preacher’s preparation. It may be feasible to meet before or after a service to have a short Bible study over one of the sermons from that day. In this way, it is not a tremendous amount of extra work for the preacher, and it provides a unique opportunity for Christians of all levels to dialogue about the lessons in ways they normally would not. If the congregation has instituted the Coffee Shoppe, this would be an ideal place to have the study. This would

give attendees the opportunity to cast the lesson to their particular needs—something the preacher attempts, but does not always achieve because of the varying life situations of the members. The time for the meeting would be decided based upon when the most people could attend, but it could be done before or after the sermon under discussion.

Another type of fellowship opportunity is the preparation of the building for services. Whether it is folding, printing and stapling papers, preparing the electronics, delivering supplies to classrooms, preparing the Lord's Supper, turning the lights on, or getting out snacks for the kids, this would be a great chance to get various people together. Situations like these give members ownership of an area of church work and it is one more great opportunity for fellowship, unity and teamwork.

2. Benefits of Fellowship As an Extension of the Worship Service

The greatest benefit of this type of fellowship opportunity is the fact that there is no extra travel time needed. The events that would fall under this heading all happen immediately before or after the worship service at the church building. With the cost of gas always on the rise, time more precious and scheduling more difficult, the opportunity to plan events when the people are already there cannot be ignored.

Added to all of this is the fact that people are generally forgetful of the things that are not required. It is easier for the members to remember, schedule the time appropriately and stay for an event than to come to a similar event on a Tuesday evening. While a prayer meeting or Bible study is a great idea for some, it will

never be well attended if it is not a main priority. People are busy. They understand the need for fellowship, but if their schedules will not allow for it, they will not attend.

3. Drawbacks to Fellowship As an Extension of the Worship Service

One major drawback to this kind of fellowship is in regard to the visitors. Since it is immediately before or after worship, it will be hard to attract visitors to these events compared with a more relaxed atmosphere. Not only this, but a visitor might feel uncomfortable while regular members are bringing in steaming dishes of food, since he has only brought himself.

Since these events take place at the church building, there is a limit to possible events the church can conduct. This is directly related to the building capacity and flexibility. There will be events that cannot be held at the building. Either these will have to take place elsewhere, or they will not take place at all. Those involved with planning the events will need to do everything possible to provide variety, knowing they will be limited by the facilities.

Some people are simply overwhelmed and intimidated by entering a church building at all. By strengthening relationships at a neutral location, we can minimize discomfort and eventually assimilate the reluctant person into the family. Regardless of whether a friend attends worship services, it is important to include as many people as possible in fellowship with the body of Christ. They will see we are just like them, while also seeing our higher purpose.

4. Obstacles to Fellowship As an Extension of the Worship Service

One of the major obstacles to this kind of fellowship is the tendency for the events to be very action-focused and not very people-focused. Steps would have to be taken to avoid this pitfall. This situation arises with many types of events such as Super Bowl parties and Movie Nights. Be sure to keep the emphasis on the fun of being together and don't fall into the trap of more and more elaborate entertainment.

Since many things we plan become regularly-occurring events, people would get used to sameness. Avoid this pitfall of boredom by using these opportunities to celebrate birthdays, having a new and interesting theme, by having cards spread out to provide talking points for the meal or by moving a regular event to a new location. Any method that changes the surroundings will provide the stimulus for conversation. Enhancing regular events provides a great way to improve fellowship while still allowing members to be in a "comfort-zone."

C. Fellowship Outside of the Church Building

Many times, for a multitude of reasons, the church building is simply not the right place for fellowship. This is perfectly understandable and necessary. After all, it would be infinitely expensive to build a building that would serve every imaginable purpose, especially when there are ample opportunities for fellowship outside of the church building.

While there will be several ideas mentioned for this kind of fellowship, in reality, the ideas are only limited by the creativity of the planners. However, this area will focus on events where the entire congregation is welcome to attend. Divided group outings will be discussed later.

1. Types of Fellowship Outside the Church Building

Seminars are a wonderful outreach and education tools for the church; however, they are also a good fellowship tool. Depending on the facilities, the purpose of the seminar and the decision of the leadership, it may be more feasible to have this at a different location.

There are also abundant opportunities for group trips. Whether they are day trips to the zoo, trips to a sporting event, a restaurant or any other place in the area, this is a great way to give people a chance to spend time with their brothers and sisters in Christ outside of the worship service and church building.

Whether it takes place immediately after church or some other time in the week, the church can organize nursing home trips. This would be an even greater opportunity if the congregation could visit the shut-ins, the sick or the family of some of the members of the congregation. While it would not be possible to do the activity at one place with the entire congregation, it would be possible to break up into teams and make sure everyone who wishes is encouraged to participate.

There are also a variety of organizations that Christians can take part in locally. Organizations such as Habitat for Humanity and Boys and Girls Club give Christians a wonderful chance to do good, live up to the example Christ set and develop deeper relationships with one another.

2. Benefits of Fellowship Outside the Church Building

For most of the members of the church, there are a few people they know and see at least occasionally outside of the assembling of the saints. This gives those members a

chance to see fellow Christians out of their suits and dresses. Instead of just being “church people” who have “church conversations,” they can become real people and real friends. They can discuss ways to help others, funny things that have happened in daily life, tell jokes and simply be themselves. Too often the stilted conversations at the church door leave a person with little idea of what their brothers and sisters in Christ are truly like on the inside.

Part of the draw to these events will be the fact that, although everyone is invited, people will gravitate towards those things that interest them. The goal of these events is to include everyone, yet some will not be interested. This means that people who attend these events will have things in common to discuss. Not only this, but the hope is present that when similar situations arise in their own lives, like a member doing home renovation or finishing up a scrapbook, they will know someone to call to help with the task.

A benefit that is applicable any time there is fellowship is the opportunity to pool resources. There are opportunities for reduced admission, reduced stress, increased opportunity to try new things, and most importantly, a decrease in loneliness as true friendships solidify.

A further benefit is the opportunity to draw in shy members or those who rarely take part in activities. If it is possible to plan an event suited to the interests of that person, it will help to get them involved with the group. This will also have the potential of showing this “peripheral” member that he has a lot in common with some of his brothers and sisters.

3. Drawbacks to Fellowship Outside the Church Building

One of the drawbacks to this kind of fellowship is the possibility of a limited response. Realize that not everyone will come, even though these events are designed to accommodate, appeal to and allow for everyone.

Also, planning is a much more difficult process when location, food, transportation, cost, timing, scheduling and the like must all be figured out before anyone leaves. Imagine the disaster of leaving a person at the zoo without any way to get home. This would be much less likely at the church building and easier to correct if it did happen.

The cost is also a drawback, either on the part of the people attending or on the part of the congregation. Fellowship meals are not as burdensome because cooking a large dish and dessert at home is only slightly more expensive than cooking several small dishes at home.

4. Obstacles to Fellowship Outside the Church Building

One of the obstacles to fellowship of this sort is the travel time expense. While carpooling can be utilized as another opportunity for fellowship, this issue can still present problems, especially if there is a long distance to the destination.

Another possible obstacle to fellowship outside of the church building is scheduling. When an event happens at the church building, it is not a catastrophe if one member is late. However, if the congregation is traveling even a short distance, one or two late people can destroy the schedule.

II. ORGANIZED FELLOWSHIP

The church has an irreplaceable role in society. It is the vehicle chosen by God to spread His Word; it is the place to receive proper instruction on spiritual matters; it is the place for encouragement and fellowship with “those who have received a faith of the same kind as ours” (2 Pet. 1:1; cf. Heb. 13:7; 2 Tim. 4:2).

Sadly, the church has lost her footing in society. People no longer look to the church for God’s message or for God’s people. There is only one way to counteract this trend: be the people God has called us to be. Spread the seed of the Good News, be the people of the Good News and live like we have Good News to talk about!

God has tremendously blessed His people with the abilities and talents to do His will. God says, “My word...will not return to Me empty, without accomplishing what I desire, and without succeeding in the matter for which I sent it” (Isa. 55:11). The job is ours. How will God’s Word be spread? There are many ways we can accomplish His goals. One of these ways is through developing deep friendships with God’s people and using this as a tool for evangelism. Organized fellowship offers just this opportunity.

Organized fellowship differs from the other types under discussion because this is where the body of believers is analyzed as separate or individual parts. Everyone can visit nursing homes. Everyone can be a part of the fellowship meals. Men’s retreats are for men. Men cannot attend the ladies’ retreats. The senior saints cannot come to teen lock-ins. Small group Bible studies are limited to a predetermined small number. When two families get together, it is limited to the two families involved. While cyber fellowship is *open* to all members, it still takes place

as individual or small group fellowship more than corporate-style fellowship.

As these are analyzed, emphasis will be placed upon the strengths and weaknesses of dividing the body of Christ in this way.

A. Organized Fellowship in Component Groups

Corporate fellowship is great and serves a vital and necessary role in the health and life of the church. However, one major drawback is that people, when left to their own devices, are more comfortable around people like themselves. Especially in a large congregation, it is easy to see the people who are dissimilar without finding those very similar people. It is ideal, then, to find opportunities to divide the congregation to allow for more individual fellowship.

One of the most popular ways to divide a congregation is in component groups of similar people. The various common traits these people share make them an ideal group for close relationships, whether this similarity is by age, gender, occupation, hobbies or even available free time.

The ways the congregation can be divided is beyond the scope of the present discussion. Men's groups, ladies' groups, teens, older members, kids, moms, dads, grandparents and singles all come to mind. However, each congregation is composed of a vast assortment of people with different collective and individual needs. While one congregation may have a thriving knitting, scrapbooking or "snow bird" group, another congregation may not have a single member with any of these characteristics. The main division that can be drawn, then, is how large the group is and where the group can meet.

1. Types of Fellowship in Component Groups

Unlike the division for corporate fellowship, the types of fellowship are not groupings or headings. Rather, they are listed as the purposes for which the group would meet. The reason for the delineation is because small groups of people have a way of losing focus on a goal. A group that, at one time, placed emphasis on serving the community or congregation, can lose focus and become a mere diversion for its members. There is a time for diversion and this is especially true with the kinds of group fellowship under discussion. However, the group cannot only meet for fun and games. Service, study and prayer are integral parts of Christian fellowship. Because of this, each group must ask what purpose is being served by its existence. While there are probably several that will not be discussed, here are a few reasons why a group can meet together.

i.) Service Fellowship

The world is full of hurting people, desperate need and abundant opportunity. All of these combine to create a perfect storm for a group of people who see that need and are willing to fill it. The Bible is replete with calls to action in regard to the needs of others. Paul commands the Galatians, "So then, while we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, and especially to those who are of the household of the faith" (6:10). This kind of service is a wonderful opportunity to combine fellowship with discipleship, evangelism, care for the widows and poor, and edification. The possibilities are limited only by the people and their interests.

Besides the advantages in the areas of evangelism, discipleship and the like, it is also a good opportunity to get to know people outside of their normal activities. If a

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young Christian sees an elder or deacon raking leaves or painting a fence, this will make a great impact and broaden his perspective of that leader. Service fellowship gives people who might not normally interact the chance to have contact with fewer barriers.

ii.) Interest Fellowship

Service fellowship is a great way to accomplish a number of goals with very different people. However, when simple fellowship is the goal, focusing on common interests may build ties faster. It is a great opportunity to get people together without their common faith being the only common denominator. An individual will feel much more connected with the church if there are people there who enjoy the same things she does.

A great benefit to fellowship that is based on shared interest is the fact that many of the things people are interested in are things they do not do. A person may love concerts, football games, art shows and museums but never go because she doesn't want to go alone or she doesn't keep up with current schedules. A person can also develop new interests when they observe their brothers and sisters taking part in an activity.

If a person is already involved in a hobby or activity, it is often easy to see the benefit of doing this as a group: pooling resources, learning from each other and an increase in fun!

iii.) Study Fellowship

There are many reasons for groups to meet together, but the most important relationship is our relationship to God and our relationship to each other through Him. It is vital, then, that Christians spend time studying His Word. This study time can be even more pertinent and meaningful when discussed with people

who have the same struggles, victories, lifestyles and outlooks. Paul spent time with Aquila and Priscilla because, as Luke puts it in the book of Acts, “he was of the same trade, he stayed with them and they were working, for by trade they were tent-makers” (18:3). How much more beneficial was their study time together, since they shared so many common interests! Remember though, Jesus spoke a great deal about unity in John 17. Any time the church is divided into parts, for whatever reason, care must be taken that discord does not develop.

2. Benefits of Fellowship in Component Groups

While the subject is necessarily broad, there are a number of benefits specific to this kind of fellowship. Not only do the people have hobbies in common, as previously mentioned, but their scheduling needs, favorite hang outs, daily activities, stresses, burdens and temptations may be shared as well. This gives added strength to the group for accountability, assistance and structure.

The groups that are formed also have the advantage of being ultimately customizable. Each congregation is different and has different needs, and not every group will have to be divided based on commonalities. Some activities and groups can form that actually play up our unique differences. One example of this is the Secret Sisters Program, where women share cards, small gifts and notes of encouragement in an effort to get to know each other better. This could easily be done with men, children, grandparents, students or any other group.

Fellowship in large or small groups is a great way for people to get involved with the body of Christ without individual pressure or feeling put “on the spot.” It is also

great because, while scheduling is more difficult, a group can go if one or two are unable to go.

3. Drawbacks to Fellowship in Component Groups

Small groups of this nature would require more responsibility and planning. A lot of new stress would fall upon the small group's organizer to make sure things happen appropriately. For instance, the organizer would need to book the church building or other location in advance and would have the always-sticky situation of trying to work around multiple people's schedules. The stress of planning is a valid drawback and the group should remember to thank and praise the person who takes on the greater part of overcoming this for the good of the group.

4. Obstacles to Fellowship in Component Groups

One of the main obstacles to fellowship is attendance. As the congregation breaks up into smaller units, regular attendance will be more uneven and also more necessary. When a group only has 10 members, one or two people can have a huge effect on the group's effectiveness.

There would also be the additional cost for attending, whether that is food, gas or time. Also, it would be difficult to attend more than one small group, yet a person may feel drawn to more than one, whether it is through a spouse or friend, or because of multiple interests.

One drawback to this kind of fellowship is the need for additional leadership. Each group will need to have a few people who lead without dominating. Older leaders would need to be reminded to encourage younger leaders instead of dominating them. If done properly, this could assist in training younger Christians for service as deacons

or elders, and would result in added responsibility regardless of the individual's potential leadership success.

B. Individual Fellowship

The Bible talks about group fellowship quite a bit, especially in Acts 2. Group fellowship serves a great role, especially in the modern church. However, group fellowship has a major disadvantage: lack of depth. While the people involved in the group may spend time doing great things, there is not the time for one-on-one communication, encouragement or discovery. There is a definite need for individual fellowship for each Christian and for the church as a whole.

1. Advantages to Individual Fellowship

Jesus gives the best example of what individual relationships should look like. The time He spent with the twelve was authentic, individual friendship. "He traveled with them, ate with them, even washed their feet. He connected so authentically with them that one disciple (maybe all of them) felt that he was 'the disciple whom Jesus loved'" (Anderson 104). It would be fair to say that Jesus had a larger impact on the woman at the well in John 4 than He did on the average person in the crowd of 5,000 in Luke 9. Relationships cannot be formed "in one hour a week of formal class time, transmitting information to a classroom full of people at different stages and with varying needs" (Anderson 103). Even in a group outing, where fellowship, not information, is the purpose, the opportunity for close relationships to form is diminished because of the crowds.

Also, there is a real opportunity to develop honest relationships. The Bible makes note of the fact that Jesus was angry, Jesus cried, He loved, He felt dread, He was troubled and probably experienced every other

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conceivable emotion (Matt. 21:12; John 11:35; John 11; 19; John 11:13; Luke 22; Heb. 4:15). The reason He can be an example for us is because He spent time with His disciples in every circumstance of life.

There is the tendency to create an aura that is worn on special occasions, like church. That person may be a totally different person on a random day of the week—not sinful—but more open and appealing. Only by interacting and fellowshiping with people in situations of real emotion and real life can we begin to see and understand who these people really are on the inside.

While it is more difficult to begin individual fellowship, one advantage is that it is easier to get on the same page with one person for dinner plans or an event than an entire group. Not only are there less “moving parts,” but it is easier to call one person on the phone than to call a dozen to schedule or reschedule.

2. Disadvantages to Individual Fellowship

There are many different ways individual fellowship can be accomplished without being overly difficult. However, individual fellowship is decidedly more difficult for the average member than any of the aforementioned types. This is true for several reasons:

i.) There Is Little Congregational Oversight

While the other methods of fellowship have been either hosted by or organized by the congregation, individual fellowship is not. The leadership can help, but the effort must be expended by the members initially as well as throughout for it to be successful. Not only this, but at any moment the person could simply stop exerting the necessary effort and there would be no one there for accountability.

This means that the individual Christian must be made aware of the need for fellowship and the end result. While it is easier to not take the first step, the end result is well worth the effort.

ii.) It Is Easy to Never Plan a Beginning

Even if a person understands how important individual fellowship is, that person may never actually decide to act on that need. This connects back to accountability and oversight. The leadership must set the standard, begin the effort and then offer help whenever it is possible. Procrastination definitely comes into play here; it's easy to plan to do something later. Sometimes later never comes.

iii.) It Is Difficult to Arrange

Even if the person really does see a pressing need and wants to invite a family over for dinner, actually following through is a different matter altogether. Individual fellowship would come more naturally if the person had a good relationship with this family. However, this is not always the case. While many people know their brothers and sisters in Christ, they may not know them beyond name and occupation.

Also, the general fear of small talk, planning, transportation, cleaning and preparation may make it more difficult to arrange. It is important that, as much as possible, the leadership find ways to defuse these worries and find viable alternatives.

iv.) It Is Generally Unexpected

Sometimes awkwardness develops if little has been done in the way of personal fellowship in the congregation. The leadership can come to the rescue here (a bit) by suggesting a progressive dinner or issuing a "fellowship challenge" complete with sign-up sheets.

Again, much depends upon the good example set by those who are more in the spotlight. These hardy people can be instrumental in helping the members feel comfortable getting out of their comfort zone. This is especially true today. An editorial in *Christianity Today*, entitled "Look at All the Lonely People," puts it plainly, "Perhaps the same thing that is sabotaging marriage is undermining friendship: our increasing unwillingness to commit to relationships that require sacrifice, mutual accountability, and a generous share of humility."

3. Individual Fellowship within Normal Activities

One of the best and easiest ways to start individual fellowship is within the activities that are normal parts of the day—a nice dinner, shopping trips, play-dates for the kids, carpooling or even regular errands should all be opportunities that can be examined. These are excellent opportunities even if the activities are not done together. For example, one person can pick up both of the orders of dry cleaning while the other watches the kids.

i.) Types of Individual Fellowship within Normal Activities

The types of fellowship are too broad to mention, especially since one person's day may be completely different from another's. The basic idea would be to find a regularly occurring event or activity and a new friend to share it. Sometimes it will be immediately rewarding. Sometimes it won't be! It is important to keep trying.

Everyone in the congregation engages in mealtimes. Why not share them? Nearly everyone goes grocery shopping. For many people, the dentist is almost as much fun as grocery shopping! Planning these routine occurrences with a friend may reduce the stress on both people. This is especially nice if both of them have older

kids who can stay together. This is an opportunity for multiple levels of fellowship.

ii.) Benefits of Individual Fellowship within Normal Activities

Many of these benefits are well known and easily recognized. A friend to spend time with is a great asset in life, and in a time when loneliness is so prevalent, should never be taken for granted. Life is less stressful when someone is there to laugh with you. Chores become chances for fun. Usually boring or dreary trips are shorter when filled with conversation. The kids are easier to watch with extra eyes.

iii.) Drawbacks to Individual Fellowship within Normal Activities

The main drawback is the time investment. Very few people are going to be this comfortable with a person overnight. It will take a long time of relationship-building before a friendship like this becomes a reality. However, once the relationship is formed, the benefits far outweigh the drawbacks.

Connected to this idea is the simple loss of privacy. A friendship like this means lots of “real life” time spent together. A true friend will see you both at your best and at your worst. Many people will be fearful of letting their Christian brothers and sisters see them at their worst. This is what Jesus referred to as “whitewashed tombs” (Matt. 23:27). One cannot constantly be worried about what “others” think. These people are brothers and sisters in Christ! Remember what Paul says in Galatians 6:1-2. If these people can’t help bear your burdens, who can be expected to?

There is also the possibility that one person will feel overburdened. Many people deeply internalize the

stresses and troubles of those closest to them. That may make a person fearful of connecting on anything more than a superficial level. Realize there will be a great deal of leaning in any true relationship. One hopes there will be a balance and that neither partner will feel overly burdened. Strive for balance in each relationship and remember that communication is the key to any relationship.

iv.) Obstacles to Individual Fellowship within Normal Activities

There will always be the beginning “first impression” phase. There may be a frenzy of cleaning, cooking, planning and worrying at first. But everyone eats sandwiches for dinner some times. Very few people in small households eat the meals served to guests on a regular basis. Try not to constantly succumb to the pressure to impress. Remember the old adage—Be yourself.

For some people, distance may be an obstacle. In many congregations members may live quite a distance apart. While this does not stop a person from reaching out, it does make reaching out more difficult.

4. Individual Fellowship That Is “Occasion Fellowship”

A separate part of individual fellowship is what could be called occasion fellowship. These provide wonderful reasons for people to get together. This could even be seen as a bridge from corporate and organized fellowship into individual fellowship. This is an opportunity to enjoy the company of many brothers and sisters at once.

A lot of people enjoy grilled food, especially when it is done well. Markedly less people grill food well. A lot of people like to go out on a Sea Doo. Less people own

one. The opportunities for occasion fellowship are boundless. Why do these fun events alone?

i.) Types of Occasion Fellowship

There are two main ways to divide “occasion fellowship.” Event fellowship centers on the thing that will be done, while occasion fellowship centers on why an activity is being done.

a) Event Fellowship

One problem with living in a given area for an extended amount of time is the fact that it is so easy to take for granted the things tourists travel long distances to see. This is part of event fellowship. You want to go to the zoo? Do you think you are the only person who would like an excursion to the zoo? As it turns out, the Palm Beach Zoo has a pass that is good for the owner and a guest. If you really like the zoo, buy that pass and take someone with you every month.

You want to go see that new action movie? Do you think you are the only one who wants to go? Movies are no fun when you are the only one who has seen it. Bring a friend and talk all the way home about the great (or not so great) ending.

There is a new exhibit at the museum that you want to see. You guessed it! Someone else wants to go, too! Go together! This same question works for new book releases, concerts, plays, sporting events and any event imaginable. It might even be *bearable* to dress up like a prince for a costume party when someone else’s wife talked them into it as well!

b) Occasion Fellowship

For many people, holidays are deeply connected to family. Even the small holidays like Grandparents Day are wonderful chances to make someone feel special. Since the

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work is already being done to grill out for Labor Day, why not invite someone over, or accept an invitation to visit someone else's home. The Christmas and Thanksgiving holidays can be difficult for many people on many different levels. When planning these holidays particularly, keep in mind that young couple who just moved away from their nuclear family, as well as a widow or widower who might love the chance to take part in a family celebration.

ii.) Benefits of Occasion Fellowship

The fun of any event or outing is not simply in the event itself, but the fun of reliving it again and again. Like the joke about the preacher who hit two holes-in-one on a Sunday he should have been preaching, the punishment was in the realization that he couldn't tell anyone what had happened! Whatever the opportunity is, if something is worth attending, it will be worth sharing and talking about later.

Also, as was mentioned earlier, there are a lot of opportunities to save money. Searching the internet can turn up great coupons for individuals or groups. Many attractions sell a yearly pass that allows the passholder to bring a guest for free. The day may not cost much more than lunch and a shared tank of gas!

iii.) Drawbacks to Occasion fellowship

For any possibility, there will be drawbacks. As always, events like this include added stress, especially if these events take place in your home. Making sure everything is done appropriately and at the right time is always important in cooking, but never more so than when you have guests. The important thing is to focus on the people more than the location.

Another drawback that could develop is a person feeling a sense of duty—like they must have people over on every occasion. Sometimes, it is good to just be with family. This is not an excuse for never inviting anyone over, but it is true that there are times to spend with those who are the very closest to you.

A difficulty with this particular kind of fellowship is the fact that new members and visitors must be remembered and included. From personal experience I can tell you, it *cannot* be the preacher who does the including. The preacher *cannot* be the first person to invite a new or prospective member into his home. The members must step up in this particular area because new members and visitors will feel intimidated, regardless of how friendly and outgoing the preacher happens to be.

iv.) Obstacles to Occasion Fellowship

The main obstacle to watch out for in occasion fellowship is the possibility that cliques may form. While every church will have people who are more or less involved, it is absolutely essential that everyone feel included at times. If a member holds an annual party for New Year's or Thanksgiving, that member must make it a priority to not invite the same people every year. If a member feels continuously excluded, do not be surprised when that member stays home from church or chooses to worship elsewhere (Miller 88). "Unconditional friendship assures the new Christian that our concern is genuine," and if we do not give them unconditional friendship, they will feel manipulated and used (Bales 31). No part of the body deserves to feel cut off without a reason, and the only reasons this can happen are cliquishness and the lack of foresight. One must be outgrown; the other must be avoided.

C. CYBER FELLOWSHIP

A relatively new phenomenon that provides a wonderful opportunity for additional fellowship is cyber fellowship. With the explosion of the internet and especially social networking sites like MySpace, Bebo and Facebook, cyber fellowship is easily within the reach of anyone with access to the internet.

1. Types of Cyber Fellowship

The main thrust of cyber fellowship revolves around social networking sites, and these truly are a great way to interact with other people. There are two main social networking sites at the time of this writing: MySpace and Facebook. However, there are dozens of specialized social networking sites and a number of smaller sites like Bebo that may grow significantly.

Another method that has been used for over a decade is email. Email is a quick way to say hello or to invite someone to an event. You can also send greeting cards and share photos by email. The dreaded email forward can also be a way to let someone know they are being remembered. It's ok to pass on an email forward if you know the person will be interested in the content. Just be careful to check out the validity of the information so you won't be caught passing on untruths. One way to do this is by checking out the information at www.snopes.com.

While not in the same category, Instant Messaging and text messaging are also great ways to get in touch with people, especially if it is just to pass along a snippet of information or to say hello.

2. Benefits of Cyber Fellowship

Cyber fellowship is, by far, the least invasive, *least stressful and simplest form* of fellowship. Where other types

of fellowship involve conversations about the how, when, where, how much and how often, cyber fellowship does not. When other forms of fellowship take hours, cyber fellowship lets people know you are thinking about or praying for them in a matter of seconds.

Not only this, but cyber fellowship is also a great tool for the congregation to use. If the preacher discusses “the peace that passes all understanding,” the church’s Facebook page can start a discussion on the topic including suggestions and ideas. If a teen devotional is coming up, the church can use the “make an event” feature to invite and remind everyone.

One of the key benefits to this type of fellowship is the opportunity to see “behind the mask” to the true person beneath. You can learn a lot about your brother or sister in Christ by looking through her vacation photos online or reading his blog. Chatting online also provides a time to dialogue without feeling shy or embarrassed. Many people “come out of their shells” when behind their computer screens. Use these opportunities to get to know your acquaintances and to get to know your friends better.

3. Drawbacks to Cyber Fellowship

It is important to realize that cyber fellowship is limited to those people who own and are able to efficiently operate a computer. The lack of computer literacy can be overcome by offering seminars at your church building. Your teens can be a vital part in helping organize and execute this event. Put their talents to use! Be careful not to exclude those who can’t afford computers. Loan your own laptop for the seminar and put people in touch with local libraries offering internet access. Above all, be respectful of those who do not wish to participate in this form of fellowship. While it is a definite trend in the future and the

leadership needs to embrace it, some members may never want to take part. That's alright, because announcements are still made in the worship service and the printed bulletin still provides all the usual information. The church website and social networking page merely enhance this and add a new dynamic for those who are interested. Also remember, cyber fellowship will never, and should never, replace our desire to spend time face to face with our family in Christ.

4. Obstacles to Cyber Fellowship

A word of caution must be issued in regard to cyber fellowship. It is meant only to enhance an already thriving fellowship situation. We must never use this to replace our attendance at worship or our events/activities with our church friends. Becoming involved in this to the exclusion of "real" friendships makes one susceptible to "relational malnourishment." Bonds formed online are seemingly strong, but can never compare to having a real shoulder to cry on and a real friend to share your laughter. Enjoy your time online, but know when to turn off the screen and take a walk with a friend next door.

DEFENDING FELLOWSHIP

Many of you who have read this article may be thinking, "I am not lonely. I have many friends inside and outside the body of Christ. I am very involved in the corporate and personal lives of my brothers and sisters. I don't see what all the fuss is about..." I applaud you for your dedication to fellowship. However, please remember that one in four Americans feel they have no one they can confide in... not one single deep friendship. If you are already engaged in fellowship, who else can you reach out to? If you are lonely, please seek out friendships with your

brothers and sisters in Christ. "Love and fellowship are among the greatest blessings that a man can know on earth and these are to be found in the Lord's church to a degree found nowhere else" (Baxter 142).

In Jesus' longest recorded prayer in Scripture, He prayed specifically for us. He prayed that we would be pure, that we would be sanctified, that we would be one. This is not a task we can accomplish on our own. As Jesus said in His prayer to God, we will need His assistance. But we will also need each other. We will need someone to be there in good times and in bad. We will need someone to help us up, to hold us back and to urge us on. We can be that for each other because of our relationship to God. If no man is an island, then Christians are connected to each other through God Almighty. Our efforts will not go unnoticed, by God or by those around us. In a world of stress, turmoil and loneliness, let's make the church a haven of friendship, family and the favor of the God we serve.

I do not ask on behalf of these alone, but for those also who believe in Me through their word; that they may all be one; even as You, Father, are in Me and I in You, that they also may be in Us, so that the world may believe that You sent Me. (John 17:20-21)

Behold, how good and how pleasant it is for brothers to dwell together in unity! (Psa. 133:1)

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