

A New Community: “The Fellowship”

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West Side Church of Christ
Searcy, Arkansas
Nathan Guy

Scripture Reading

“They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer” (Acts 2:42 NIV).

LESSONS FROM COVID

I’d like to center our thinking this morning around two quotes. The first is from the New Testament. It’s found in the book of Hebrews—written to a second generation church, to a people who were growing tired of their parents traditions. Here is the quote:

“We must continue to hold firmly to our declaration of faith. The one who made the promise is faithful. We must also consider how to encourage each other to show love and to do good things. We should not stop gathering together with other believers, as some of you are doing. Instead, we must continue to encourage each other even more as we see the day of the Lord coming” (Heb 10:23-25 GW).

Did you hear that? “Don’t stop gathering together with other believers, as some of you are doing.”

Do you remember COVID?

Who could forget? We learned we need each other. That community is vital and essential. God made the world and declared it was good. And then, do you know what it was in all of his creation that he said was NOT good? That any one person should be alone (Gen 2:18). “God sets the lonely in families,” says the Psalm. “We are born helpless,” writes C. S. Lewis; “As soon as we are fully conscious, we discover loneliness. We need others physically, emotionally, intellectually; we need them if we are to know

anything, even ourselves.”¹ And so, rejecting mandates to stay in our homes, we yearned to break free and to be together. We had Zoom. We had cell phones. But we learned that community was relational and present. Zoom didn’t cut it. Hearts demand connection, and connection comes about through real presence.

And, if we take the anecdotal evidence, it seems that we also learned that assembling together to commune with Christ and witness the faith together—well that was *merely optional*. One preacher in Texas tells this story:

“I began seeing people out at restaurants and grocery stores who had told me they weren’t coming to church because of COVID. My wife and I attended a Saturday night July 4th dinner and fireworks show with about 20 people from our church. We were all eating at the same tables, sharing the same food, talking loudly and laughing with each other in tight quarters. But at least half of those people told me they would be doing church from home the next morning.” Why? Because COVID.²

You know hindsight is 20/20. Many of our members, many of our churches, did the best we could with an unknown situation. I mean, how often do we deal with a global pandemic? If you were unfortunate enough to be an elder or a school board member, or even a preacher or a school president during that time period, then—trust me—you emerged convinced that when James T Kirk said “I don’t believe in no win scenarios” he was wrong! Nobody won in those conversations. We all lost. And I don’t mean to rehash it now.

But I do think we can learn something truly valuable about fellowship by looking at three rather common reasons people had for avoiding church during COVID. These aren’t all the reasons. I know some very, very good reasons why some avoided coming on Sunday morning. Some knew that others had pre-existing conditions that meant if I was a bearer, I might take your life away; and my love for you is why I stayed away. I think that is a noble reason. There are other good reasons.

But some of our reasons (the ones that felt more like excuses) revealed a misunderstanding of the church’s mandate to be devoted to the fellowship.

The first reason I want to consider is a rather simple one: church, we said, isn’t really about meeting together. I mean, church is not a building. Church is not a worship

¹ C. S. Lewis, *The Four Loves* (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1960), p. 10.

² Allan Stanglin. Quoted in “Pastoral Care in the Pandemic,” *Journal of Christian Studies*, 1/1 (Jan 2022): 76-77

service. Church doesn't refer to those who are "packed in" but rather to those who are "called out." Church is who you are and what you do 24/7 because God added you to church when you became a Christian. *So what* if we miss assembly? We can be and still be "church."

There are some great truths in that paragraph, mixed with some questionable half-truths in that paragraph that, when put together, leads to a misleading and deeply flawed conclusion. Did you know that the sermon line we all heard growing up that the word church (or *ekklesia*) means "the called out" is, in fact, not true? That line comes from tracing a false derivation. It may be true that the church is "called out" of the world, called to be different. But the word *ekklesia* does not mean "called out." What it does mean...is "assembly," which requires assembling together. What it does mean is community, which involves communing together. What it does mean is congregation, which only makes sense if we congregate. To repeatedly, intentionally, miss assembly is in fact to miss church.

The second reason or excuse we gave is this one: extraordinary circumstances call for extraordinary allowances. After all, I must have heard the word "unprecedented" 1000 times. Look, we have phones to call our friends, and livestreaming for services. In the case of an emergency, technology gives us what is essential without the risk.

True. Modifying the norms for the sake of unexpected situations should not *always* be seen as watering down the commands of God. God himself commanded a sheep or a goat to be sacrificed to him. But if you couldn't afford one, two birds would suffice. And if you were really strapped, in abject poverty, with only a bag of flour in your cupboard, then, God said, give me flour (Lev 5:6-7, 11). Exceptions can be made. But would anyone assume from reading that a wealthy man should be offering God flour?³

A lawyer friend of mine likes to say "hard cases make bad law." I believe that baptism as described in the New Testament and as practiced in the early church was full immersion in water. *That's what the word means*, after all. But in the 3rd century, this question was circulated widely: "what if an unbaptized person is on his deathbed, and he simply can't make it to the pool...what then?" One of the great leaders of the church at that time said "I suppose in such an extraordinary case, given the options and circumstances, you can sprinkle or pour some water on their head *if necessity demands it*." You know where I'm going with this. It didn't take long before "if necessity demands it" to become one option among many, then the simplest and most preferred option. I mean, if walking 25 miles to the closest body of water is simply too much of a burden,

³ See Keith D. Stanglin, "Upon This Rock I Will Build My Livestream: Reflections on Ecclesiological Emergencies," *Journal of Christian Studies* 1/1 (Jan 2022): 29.

then how about 10 miles? If 10, what about 5? We all know the story “if you give a mouse a cookie, he’s going to want a glass of milk,” right? Well, in a similar vein, “If necessity demands it” quickly became “the norm.”⁴

I don’t worry about that issue in this church. We’re good on baptism. But I do worry sometimes about the Lord’s Supper. I was not even a teenager yet in the late 80’s when I got a book of Christian humor cartoons. I remember one that featured a church building with the sign that read “made-to-order church.” And on the side of the building was a car drive thru line, with a drive-up window in which they handed out communion. That was a joke in the late 80s. In 2014, a church in Daytona Beach, Florida, offered a “drive-in theater” experience of church. You sat in your car to watch the sermon projected on the large outdoor screen, as carhops brought communion to your window. And one news reporter began their story about this church with this line: “purists might balk at a worship style in which even Communion isn’t very communal.”⁵ Fast forward 6 years and enter COVID, stage right.

The individualized, custom-made “sip and dip” cracker & juice option was certainly a helpful thing when we couldn’t leave our homes. And it remains a helpful thing for those who are permanently shut in. But as a norm for healthy members who believe in fellowship, it was never God’s intention. After all, “communion” involves actually communing with one another. *It’s what the word means* (1 Cor 10:16)! And in 1 Corinthians 10:16, what Paul says has so many layers, since the word translated “communion” is actually *koinonia*, which means “fellowship.” And the word “body” can refer to Jesus but also to the church. So listen to what he says: “The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a fellowship in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a fellowship in the body of Christ?”

The third reason we gave during COVID I’d like to reflect on is this one: technology gives us virtually the same thing that we would get were we together. I used the word “virtually” because of its double meaning. Livestream and recorded services do actually give us a virtual option for worship. But we also say “virtually” to mean “almost” or “pretty much” as in “not really.” And both are correct.

Technology has been great for expanding our personal freedom. Our technology has allowed us to lay down the broom, and press play on the Roomba. It has allowed us to no longer wait in line for the check out person—the computerized machines can do it

⁴ See Stanglin, pp. 28-31.

⁵ Amy Kiley, “Roadside Service: Drive-In Church Brings God to Your Car,” at <https://www.npr.org/2014/03/03/285278319/roadside-service-drive-in-church-brings-god-to-your-car>

instead. What we haven't realized is that these improvements to our individual lives have created great problems for our communal lives. Because they scream to the house-cleaners and the check-out personnel: we don't need you anymore.

I'm grateful we can watch a sermon in the comfort our living room, take communion from ready-made cups, and reflect on Christian life along with God from the pristine environment on my back deck. But make it a habit, and what we are saying to the church is simply this: "I don't need you anymore." And in terms of building community, we are also signaling another sad message: "you don't really need me." And nothing could be further from the truth.

God gave us commandments—livestreamed to Moses, and recorded in the book of Exodus. But grace and truth came to us in a person, fully present, whom we saw and experienced in the flesh. I can learn from you on YouTube. But I can't share in this fellowship with you without being fully present.

Some years ago, the famous preacher Dwight L. Moody was sitting by the large fireplace in the home of a prominent citizen of Chicago. Somehow the topic of church membership and involvement came up. "I am of the opinion that I can be just as fine a Christian outside of church as I can be inside it," said the owner of the house. Moody didn't say a word. Instead, he stood up from his chair and reached beside the fireplace. Taking hold of a poker, he then scooted off of the fire one single piece of burning coal, placing it on the hearth. The two men then sat there together in silence, watching as the burning ember slowly died out.⁶

A Christian writer, just after the first century had ended, wrote these words to the Christians in Ephesus:

Take heed to come together often to give thanks to God and show forth his praise. For when you assemble frequently in the same place, the powers of Satan are destroyed and the destruction at which he aims is prevented by the unity of your faith.⁷

We share faith. Let me say that again. We share faith. Because we share Christ. And the most visible place where that is put on display is in the church assembly. *It's what the word means.*

⁶ <https://www.family-times.net/illustration/Involvement/201387/>

⁷ Ignatius, *Letter to the Ephesians* 13.

And lest we forget, church was originally made up of, and intended for, those who didn't have, and couldn't afford computers or phones. Those who had to go long distances, at great risk to their health and their lives. And it was to them that the Hebrew writer said, "do not forsake the assembling of yourselves together," and don't forget that one of the great reasons you do it is to "encourage one another," "to stir one another up to love and good works," and to do it "all the more as you see the Day approaching."

WHAT GOD HAD IN MIND

That was our first quote. Here is the second quote for your consideration this morning. It comes not from the Bible, but from Charles Spurgeon—the well-known 19th century preacher from London. "Nobody can do as much damage to the church of God as the man who is within its walls, but not within its life."

Did you catch that? You can be "within the walls" of the church, but not "within the life" of the church.

The question for us this morning is what did God have in mind when he called us into fellowship? What did it look like for the early Christians who were devoted to the fellowship?

If I didn't do any study on the question, but only went with my gut and my experience, I'd think fellowship means *food*. Our church growing up had a "fellowship hall." And there we ate food. We would occasionally have a "fellowship meal," and if I wasn't quick on the draw, I'd get through the line last when the only thing left was a cold chicken leg and that green marshmallow salad goop. So when I read Paul say in the book of Galatians "they gave me the right hand of fellowship" (Gal 2:9), I just assumed that meant they used their right hand to pat my back and usher me to the front of the line!

But you know that's not a full picture of what God had in mind. You see, fellowship is the Greek word *koinonia*, and what it actually means is to "share or participate in." Think about the power of that! We share in one another's lives. And we participate in the life of God.

So this word "fellowship" appears in places where food is the furthest thing from their mind. It refers to sharing money and giving away your things. It refers to offering loving service as you minister with the saints. It refers to all sorts of things, sharing the faith you have, sharing your faith with others, and even sharing in the sufferings of Christ.

Just as the first and greatest commandment (to love God with all you have) is related to the second commandment (to love your neighbor as yourself), so fellowship with God is related to our fellowship with one another. What we experience in Christ, we share with each other. And we only fully participate in the *life* of Christ if and when we operate as part of the mutually loving *body* of Christ. This is why Paul wants to tell us to think like Christ in complete and total sacrifice and begins that section of Philippians 2 by urging us to be like Christ IF...he says, “if there is any fellowship in the Spirit” (Phil 2:1).*

Fellowship is to participate in and share life together. This is why “church” means “community,” especially one that lives and loves together. Did you know the word we usually translate “church” appears first in our New Testaments not in Acts, but on the lips of Jesus in the gospels? Maybe we can learn something about the intended life of the Jesus community. Jesus said:

If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother. But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every charge may be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses. If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the *community*. And if he refuses to listen even to the *community*, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector (Matt 18:15-17).

It sounds to me like the church that belongs to Christ—the community of Christ—is made up of members who are responsible to one another. They are all up in each other’s business.⁸ The church’s motto is: “we are in this together.”

They say a friend is “someone who will help you move,” and a true friend is someone who will help you move...a body!”⁹

Isn’t that true? If you need something, you can google services in town and find someone you can pay to take care of it for you. But friends do it for free. That by itself is something. But when you have a deeply personal need, one you wouldn’t share with just anybody, you can pay a therapist. Or you can call a friend. And they’ll listen for free. That’s something more. And when you have a really serious situation—when your wife is in a coma in the hospital, and you are feeling alone, who is going to drop everything to come and sit with you, for days, without saying a word? Only truly, truly,

⁸ See especially Ed Gallagher, “A Worshipping Community on a Mandated Break,” *Journal of Christian Studies* 1/1 (Jan 2022): 14.

⁹ Andy Crouch, *The Life We’re Looking For: Reclaiming Relationship in a Technological World* (New York: Convergent, 2022), 71.

deeply good friends. And family. And then God comes along and creates a community that is intended to be even closer than any friend; he thinks of us as a deeply connected family.

In this church, we celebrate a blessing ceremony for new babies born among us every year. We witness baptisms, show our congratulations, and often form a circle together to sing of our common love and joy for one another. We begin our classes so often listing prayer requests and we form agape groups with confessional prayer partners and there we expose the fault lines in our lives and welcome others into the most fragile parts of us. We are called to bear one another's burdens, writes Bonhoeffer, because "only as a burden is the other really a brother or sister and not just an object to be controlled."¹⁰

We share life *together*. In the words of the first-century Christian writer Ignatius:

"[We] Labor together with one another. Strive in company together. Run together; suffer together; sleep together; awake together, as the stewards, assessors, and servants of God."¹¹

Is that what church means to you?

THE DEPENDENT COMMUNITY

I actually know of a community that has no denominational headquarters. It doesn't have loads of well-paid consultants. In fact, it has no paid staff at all. This community owns no property. Has no media center. And yet, it seems to attract millions of devoted members each week. Members who energetic and participators. Members who are repentant, confessional, and intimately involved in each other's lives. Members who tell each other their deepest, darkest secrets, that even their own family doesn't know. It's called *Alcoholics Anonymous*.

If you are a regular church goer (of any kind or stripe) and chose to attend one of these sessions, you would probably exchange the smell of incense or polished wood for heavy cigarette smoke. Instead of finding the class where all the rich well-to-do's who live in the same neighborhood go before their Sunday brunch, you'd find rich and poor, millionaires and high school dropouts sitting together, sharing a cup of coffee, and

¹⁰ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together* (1940), trans. Geoffrey B. Kelly, Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works 5 (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996), 100.

¹¹ Ignatius, *Letter to Polycarp* 6.

telling each other the details of their lives. Where else would you find a prominent politician confessing their faults to a teenager with needle marks on their arms?

There is lots of baggage in that room. The one thing missing is pretence. Everyone knows who they are and why they are there. And so each person, when called upon to share with the group, begins with the same line: “My name is Nathan. And I’m an alcoholic.” An author I admire went with his friend to one of these meetings. Standing at the coffee booth, he turned to his alcoholic friend and said “I’ve noticed you hardly ever attend church with me anymore. But you are a faithful member here. You clearly find something you desperately need and I want to know what is the one quality missing in the local church that you find in abundance here at AA? The young man stared at his coffee cup for quite a while before he answered. The word that came from his mouth was not “love,” or “acceptance.” The word was this: “dependency.” This place is for those of us who can’t make it on our own.”¹²

Imagine if a hurting person, looking into the face of a doctor, or an alcoholic, looking into the face of her sponsor, were to shout: “I don’t need you anymore.” It would only be hurting themselves. Because breaking free, finding healing, and living well doesn’t work that way.

“The Lord added to the church those who were being saved. And they devoted themselves to fellowship.”

¹² Philip Yancey, *Church: Why Bother?* (Zondervan, 1998), pp. 48-52.