

BaptistWay Press® Adult Online Bible Commentary

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Studies in 14 Habits of Highly Effective Disciples

Lesson Five **Fellowship**

Focal Text

Acts 2:42-47; Romans 12:3-13

Background

Acts 2:42-47; Romans 12:3-13

Main Idea

Disciples experience the benefits and responsibilities of Christian fellowship.

Question to Explore

Am I experiencing the full benefits and responsibilities of Christian fellowship?

Quick Read

The early church learned that living in relationship with Christ also meant living in relationship with each other. Paul gave the early believers practical advice on building relationships, explaining both the benefits and responsibilities.

Introduction

What difference does the church make in the lives of disciples? Jim Samra explains:

God gives us the church to help us form our identity as Christians. The church helps us to endure suffering, bringing comfort and encouragement in difficult times. The church nourishes us with the Word and the Lord's Supper, provides godly examples for us to imitate, and disciplines us when we go astray. In addition, we grow and are transformed as Jesus is uniquely manifested in our

worship assemblies. The church provides maternal care for us in all of these ways, helping us to grow to become more like Jesus.¹

In my readings on discipleship, I am concerned about the lack of ecclesiology. There seems to be great emphasis on “Jesus and me,” but little talk about “Jesus and us” – less talk certainly than in the New Testament, for instance. How do we live life together? How do we share a common commitment to Christ?

Lester Collins, our Pastor Emeritus said to me recently, “Without individuals, nothing would get done. Without institutions, nothing would survive.” The church is Christ’s institution. Jesus said, “I will build my church” (Matthew 16:18).

We recently enjoyed the chance to worship with my wife's (Melanie's) dad at his home church, Memorial Baptist in Temple. Things have changed. The church relocated some years ago after a bus accident claimed the lives of five people, including Melanie's mom, Jo. The choir no longer wears robes. Drums and band have replaced the organ in the morning service. And we saw a lot of people that I didn't know. The pastor is not R.B. Baker, the man who did our wedding. But there in the choir stood Bob and Karen Kuryla who were a second family to Melanie when she was in high school. They took her with them to New York. Thirty years ago their daughters served as bridesmaids in our wedding.

When the offering plates were passed, the usher stopped and talked to us - Dick Stafford, the former coach of the Belton Tigers football team, leaned over and shook my hand in the middle of the row. After the service, a long line of faithful servants of God awaited Melanie, because “their girl” had come home. I have preached there on occasion over the last thirty years, but at Memorial I am just the boy who was blessed to marry Melanie.

Later, Melanie and I were talking and she reminded me that Shirley Sommers, the organist, was sitting in the choir that morning. I had visited her once when she was in a coma after the bus crash when Jo died. Shirley was on life support for so long that her trachea collapsed. At times, we didn't think she would live. But there she was, sitting in the choir, singing, and that night sitting at the organ playing. And I remembered that David wrote in the last verse of the last Psalm, “Let everything that has breath praise the Lord” (Psalm 150:6). We were so glad we did not miss that moment.

The British preacher Charles Spurgeon said,

Give yourself to the Church. You that are members of the Church have not found it perfect and I hope that you feel almost glad that you have not. If I had never joined a Church till I had found one that was perfect, I would never have joined one at all! And the moment I did join it, if I had found one, I should have spoiled it, for it would not have been a perfect Church after I had become a member of it. Still, imperfect as it is, it is the dearest place on earth to us... All who have first

given themselves to the Lord, should, as speedily as possible, also give themselves to the Lord's people. As I have already said, the Church is faulty, but that is no excuse for your not joining it, if you are the Lord's. Nor need your own faults keep you back, for the Church is not an institution for perfect people, but a sanctuary for sinners saved by grace, who, though they are saved, are still sinners and need all the help they can derive from the sympathy and guidance of their fellow believers. The Church is the nursery for God's weak children where we are nourished and grow strong. It is the fold for Christ's sheep—the home for Christ's family.²

Jesus said, "By this everyone will know you are my disciples, if you love one another" (John 13:35). Though the disciples had struggled with this, the book of Acts tells us they grew stronger. They learned to love across cultural lines providing for Greek-speaking widows as well as Hebraic widows in Jerusalem. Philip went to the Samaritans. In Antioch they loved the Gentiles enough to preach the gospel to them. These new believers studied together for a year.

Paul's letters, and particularly this one to the Romans, help us see the development of Christian community in the first century. One thing is clear: Paul, like Christ, calls Christians to practice discipleship in community. In fact there is no other way. We either become disciples in community with each other or it will not happen. How are we doing with this?

A commitment to Christ is always a commitment to community. In contrast with our individualized Christianity in the West, from the start Christ called his followers to share life together. The word the Bible uses to describe their common life together is *koinonia* or "fellowship."

We are connected but are we committed? A connection to Christ is by definition a commitment to be part of his people making disciples in the world. An early church leader named Cyprian once said, "No one can have God as his Father who does not have the church as his mother."³ Augustine also said, "Look, mother church is in labor; see, she is groaning in travail to give birth to you."⁴

Commentary

Disciples Share Christ in Common (Acts 2:42-47)

Luke tells us that Jews had gathered in Jerusalem from all over the inhabited world for the Passover. Some of them surely took this pilgrimage as an opportunity to stay an extra fifty days for Pentecost. So perhaps they had seen Christ's triumphal entry followed by the angry parade out of town on Good Friday. They had seen the crucifixion and heard the buzz about the resurrection. Then like a rushing mighty wind with tongues like fire, the promised Holy Spirit came and empowered Peter and the other disciples to testify boldly to the power of the resurrection (Acts 2:1-4).

Imagine your church growing by a multiple of twenty-five in a single day! The church in Jerusalem grew from 120 believers to 3,120 in a single day at Pentecost. So what was that first church like? Luke gives us an amazing snapshot in this first of several summary descriptions of the life of the church (compare Acts 4:32-35, 5:42, 6:7). Without question Pentecost brought excitement, but the real mark of the new church was *commitment*. The people devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread, and to prayer. Again and again Luke describes the remarkable unity of this group and their determination to be together.

What brought them together? Their common commitment to Christ united them. John would later describe it in this way, "We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard so that you also may have fellowship with us. And indeed our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ" (1 John 1:3). Fellowship is sharing a common life. The word *koinonia* speaks of sharing things in common and is translated in different contexts with the words, "participation, partnership, sharing, and fellowship."

The churches in which I grew up called our regular meals together "fellowships." These were social gatherings essentially, after the spiritual meeting. One church we joined in Germany was meeting in a dance hall over a bar. How was our fellowship different from that which took place downstairs? Some of them were drunk with wine, but we were being filled with the Spirit. And there our pastor proclaimed the word of life. The firm foundation of our fellowship must finally be our faith.

What did the early Christians believe? They believed in Christ as Peter had preached him to them. At the beginning of Acts 2 we learn that they were remarkably distinctive from various cultures and dialects within Judaism, but when Peter preached Christ crucified, they believed and were baptized into one body. They had fellowship with Jesus and they wanted to share him with others so that others might share the joy and intimacy they knew.

In our church we use the acronym W.I.S.E. to describe the priorities of our church as **W**orship, **I**nstruction, **S**haring, and **E**vangelism. The early church fulfilled the Great Commission as the apostles took these new converts into true discipleship by teaching them all the things that Christ had commanded (Matthew 28:19-20). Wouldn't we love to hear Peter preach about forgiveness or John talk about love? This was their regular diet in preaching.

Not only did they feast on God's word together and share all things in common, but this early church shared meals together. They devoted themselves to the "breaking of bread." This likely meant keeping Christ's command to eat what we call "the Lord's Supper." But they also ate daily meals together from house to house.

Recently I participated in the installation of a young friend of mine as pastor of a church here in Texas. David grew up in Cuba, completed his Ph.D. in Germany, and moved to

Texas to become a pastor. As he shared in the Lord's Supper in Spanish, I tasted a little piece of heaven. Christians still break bread together remembering Christ's sacrifice for us.

The early believers also shared together a commitment to pray. Spiritual community finds deep roots in sweet communion with God in prayer. The Jewish community in Jerusalem still shared together in regular hours of prayer. Later we find Peter and John going up to the temple at the time of prayer (Acts 3:1). Then when a lame man asked for alms Peter said, "Silver or gold I do not have, but what I have I give you. In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth rise up and walk" (Acts 3:6). See again that the one thing the early church had to share was Jesus.

A.W. Tozer uses a great analogy about a concert in this context. If you brought in one hundred pianos and tried to tune them to each other you might have chaos. He asked, "Has it ever occurred to you that one hundred pianos all tuned to the same fork are automatically tuned to each other?"⁵ Just so, when you and I are in tune with Christ, living in deliberate devotion and intentional intimacy with him, we come together and find that we have everything we need in common. Christ is the center of our communion with each other.

Disciples Share Life in Common

Fellowship is relationship and partnership together for the purpose of glorifying God and sharing his life with the world. So in Acts 2 we see in verse 42 that they committed themselves to the fellowship. Then in verse 44 we read that they shared all things in common. The uncommon life of Christians is that we share life in common. How did they do it? *Together*. In Acts 2:1 they were all together, in Acts 2:44 they were together, in verse 46 they met together and they ate together. In a unique season in the life of the church, they decided to share their possessions with each other.

Many of those who had come up to Jerusalem for Pentecost had become Christians. Staying in the city, they had no means of income. There were widows in the gathering who also had no source of money. In a community built on God's love given freely, they freely loved each other by giving their possessions away for the common good.

Later Luke tells us, "All the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of his possessions was his own, but they shared everything they had" (Acts 4:32). Again we learn that they sold land and gave it to the apostles to share with those who had needs (Acts 4:34-35). Barnabas may have earned his nickname "Son of Encouragement" when he became the leading example of this sharing of financial resources.

Are Christians "together" today? Are we sharing life together? Some anonymous poet wrote, "To dwell above with the saints we love, oh that will be glory; to dwell below with the saints I know, well that's another story."

As believers we share inextricably interdependent lives. This is why we need to be together with other believers. They prayed together and ate together – they shared life.

The Council of Economic Advisers recently reported, "The largest federally funded study of American teenagers found a strong association between regular family meals (five or more dinners per week with a parent) and academic success, psychological adjustment, and lower rates of alcohol use, drug use, early sexual behavior, and suicidal risks."⁶ Just as families need to eat together, so Christians must spend time with other Christians on a regular basis.

Disciples Share Ministry in Common (Romans 12:3-11)

Paul often followed a great doctrinal section in his letters with a practical application. In his letter to the Romans, Paul began with eleven chapters of theology and then made a shift toward the practical dimensions of the Christian life. After calling the Christians in Rome to a life of sacrificial and transformational worship, he compared the church to a body.

Christians live with humility when we remember the grace God has given us. This humility fosters unity in the body as we use our diverse gifts together according to the faith God has given. As each person has a body with many parts, so the church is one body with many different parts and functions.

Connection

Christians are connected to one another. This connection comes through Christ. Each of us belongs to all the other members. This is especially helpful in our disconnected world where people have myriad electronic connections and hundreds of social media friends, but nobody to talk to in times of difficulty. Loneliness has the potential to shorten the quantity and shape the quality of one's life. Through our mutual connection to Christ we realize that we are connected to each other as well. We cannot live insular lives, isolating ourselves from others and simultaneously fulfill Christ's plan for the church.

Edification

In our diverse gifting by grace we discover that we have gifts which will help the body of Christ. Our gifts come from Christ, leaving us no room for pride. We use our gifts by faith or trust in the God who has given them to us.

Some have the gift of prophecy, which is speaking a message from God. Servants should serve and teachers should teach. All of us appreciate the encouragers in the body of Christ. Generosity, leadership, and mercy round out this list of spiritual gifts. Just as our bodies function best when each part does its work, so the body of Christ is built up and strengthened when each of us does what God has gifted us to do. By faith we trust the Giver to enable us to serve well.

Christian leader Gordon MacDonald shared the following story about how God transformed him from "giving as merely an institutional obligation" to becoming a cheerful giver.

On the first Sunday of our visit, we joined a large crowd of desperately poor Christians for worship. As we neared the church, I noticed that almost every person was carrying something. Some hoisted cages of noisy chickens, others carried baskets of yams, and still others toted bags of eggs or bowls of cassava paste.

"Why are they bringing all that stuff?" I asked one of our hosts. "Watch!" she said. Almost every person in that African congregation brought something: a chicken, a basket of yams, a bowl of cassava paste. I saw that giving, whether yams or dollars, is not optional for Christ followers.

Soon after the worship began, the moment came when everyone stood and poured into the aisles, singing, clapping, even shouting. The people began moving forward, each in turn bringing whatever he had brought to a space in the front.⁷

What will we bring to worship? Will we leave our resources at home? Be careful about things— we can worship possessions. So we bring our wealth to church with us and give it away.

At our church, we have asked God to bring us the people who need him most. God is doing that, and people from all over the world are coming. We have new members from Nepal and from the Congo. Our church is asking, "How can we, in Jesus' name, help them to have their needs met?" One of our members hired a number of our Burmese brothers and sisters, providing them needed work.

Ambrose, a 4th century theologian and church leader, wrote: "There is your brother, naked and crying! And you stand confused over the choice of an attractive floor covering."⁸ Basil the Great (theologian and bishop in modern-day Turkey, also from the 4th century) wrote, "The bread you do not use is the bread of the hungry. The garment hanging in your wardrobe is the garment of the person who is naked. The shoes you do not wear are the shoes of the one who is barefoot. The money you keep locked away is the money of the poor."⁹

Likewise in the Didache, or the collection of early teachings of the church, we find these words: "Do not turn your back on the needy, but share everything with your brother and call nothing your own. For if you have what is eternal in common, how much more should you have what is transient!"¹⁰

Compassion

Christian love wears no masks. Paul tells the believers in Rome that love should be without hypocrisy. This word came from the stage where actors wore masks. The church is a place where we take off our masks and live with love for each other.

Are Christians allowed to hate anything? Many are quick to label those who disagree with them as hateful or “haters.” Christians never hate other people, but we do hate what is evil. We despise sin in our own lives and in the lives of others. If we do not start our hatred of evil by acknowledging the reality of sin in our own lives, we are unlikely to receive an audience in our world.

So we never say, “you sinners,” but instead we start such conversations with the phrase, “we sinners.” At the same time, we hold on to the good in our world. God’s created order, though affected deeply by the sinful choices of humankind, still bears the marks of his creative power. Humankind is created in his image. Though we are fallen, we have hope.

More than anything, Christians reveal our discipleship by our love. As we love each other we demonstrate the reality of Christ’s love in us. Paul uses two words to describe the relationships in the body of Christ. One word gives us the name of the city in ancient Asia Minor and present-day Pennsylvania: Philadelphia.

The word translated “devoted” also incorporates the Greek word *philon* and another word for love: *storge*. We demonstrate this love by honoring others above ourselves. In a notoriously self-centered world, we distinguish ourselves by genuinely caring for others.

A few years ago one of the disciples in our congregation lost his job and the jobs of a large number of workers under him because of a merger of businesses. This brother in Christ worked hard to find jobs for every one of his employees before he found a job for himself. Non-believers in his department took notice of the way he lived out his faith by genuinely caring for the needs of others. We can be sure that non-Christians in our world are watching.

Love gives the church great warmth as we “boil over” with the Spirit of God. So we never lose our fervor. People often boil over in anger. The need for “anger-management” and frequent road-rage incidents remind us of the hot tempers in our world. *What if believers boiled over with love instead of anger?*

God’s love within his people helps us in powerful ways. So we remain joyful in our hope. Hope in the Christian context represents confident expectation. Our hope is not mere wishful thinking. Such hope makes us patient when life’s pressures mount. When life does not go our way, we pray, faithfully. James said the faithful prayers of the righteous make a big difference (James 5:16).

Love liberates us from selfishness. Christians are generous because our God has been generous with us. Here again, Paul uses the word *koinonia* to speak of the sharing in common of God's people. As in the church at Jerusalem, so believers in Rome, (and in our world as well) should share their lives and livelihood with each other.

We saw Texas Baptists sharing in action after a tornado devastated many in our town of Cedar Park in May of 2007. Texas Baptist men came with money, food, and tools to help. Christians not only help our own but we exercise hospitality or literally "love of strangers."

What if the Christians in our churches and cities lived out Paul's staccato style description of the Christian life of connection, edification, and compassion? Such love would authenticate our message in ways beyond our imagination.

Conclusion

When I came to Tallowood I discovered that we had not one but two fellowship halls. These rooms and a new Chapel reception area have become the places where we share life. After weddings we gather in these rooms to rejoice with those who rejoice. After funerals we gather there to weep with those who weep. Fellowship is finally about sharing the life Christ has given generously to us with one another.

Fred Craddock writes,

My mother took us to church and Sunday school; my father didn't go. He complained about Sunday dinner being later when she came home. Sometimes the preacher would call, and my father would say, "I know what the church wants. Church doesn't care about me. Church wants another name, another pledge, another name, and another pledge. Right? Isn't that the name of the game? Another name, another pledge." That's what he always said. Sometimes we'd have a revival. Pastor would bring the evangelist and say to the evangelist, "There's one now, sic him, get him, get him," and my father would say the same thing. Every time, my mother in the kitchen, always nervous, in fear of flaring tempers, of somebody being hurt. And always my father said, "The church doesn't care about me. The church wants another name and another pledge." I guess I heard it a thousand times.

One time he didn't say it. He was in the veteran's hospital, and he was down to 73 pounds. They'd taken out his throat, and he said, "It's too late." They put in a metal tube, and X-rays burned him to pieces. I flew in to see him. He couldn't speak, couldn't eat. I looked around the room, potted plants and cut flowers on all the windowsills, a stack of cards twenty inches deep beside his bed. And even that tray where they put food, if you can eat, on that was a flower. And all the flowers beside the bed, every card, every blossom, were from persons or groups from the church. He saw me read a card. He could not speak, so he took a Kleenex box and

wrote on the side of it a line from Shakespeare. If he had not written this line, I would not tell you this story. He wrote: "In this harsh world, draw your breath in pain to tell my story." I said, "What is your story, Daddy?"

And he wrote, "I was wrong."¹¹

Meet the Writer: Dr. Duane Brooks

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Duane was called to preach while in middle school in Germany and ordained in Great Falls, Montana. He has served as pastor in four Texas Baptist churches - New Hope Baptist Church in Cedar Park, Williams Creek Baptist Church in Mart, and Pleasant Grove Baptist Church in Rosebud. Duane and his wife, Melanie, have two sons, Graham and Chase, and a daughter, Casey.

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¹ James George Samra. *The Gift of Church: How God Designed the Local Church to Meet Our Needs as Christians* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2010), 89.

² Charles H. Spurgeon. "The Best Donation" Sunday Evening Sermon. Metropolitan Tabernacle, London. 5 April 1891.

³ Cyprian. *De catholicae ecclesiae unitate*, 6 as cited in Augustine, and R.W. Dyson. *The Pilgrim City: Social and Political Ideas in the Writings of St. Augustine of Hippo* (Woodbridge, Suffolk, UK: Boydell, 2001), 12.

⁴ Allan Fitzgerald and John C. Cavadini. *Augustine through the Ages: An Encyclopedia* (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans, 1999), 174.

⁵ A. W. Tozer and James L. Snyder. *The Pursuit of God* (Ventura, CA: Regal, 2013), 87.

⁶ http://clinton3.nara.gov/WH/EOP/CEA/html/Teens_Paper_Final.pdf , 22.

⁷ Gordon MacDonald. "Transforming Scrooge" *Christianity Today* (Spring 2013): 2. 21 Mar. 2014 www.christianitytoday.com/le/2013/spring/transforming-scrooge.html?start=2>.

⁸ Ambrose.

⁹ Basil the Great.

¹⁰ Cyril Charles Richardson. "The Teaching of the Twelve Apostles, Commonly Called the Didache." *Early Christian Fathers* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996), 173.

¹¹ Fred Craddock, Mike Graves, and Richard F. Ward. *Craddock Stories* (St. Louis, MO: Chalice, 2001), 14.