

## Spiritual Disciplines Series - Spring 2006 - King's Centre Church

### **Fellowship (19.02.06)**

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#### Intro

Continuing today with our series on the disciplines of the spiritual life.

So far, we've looked at

- the issue of God's grace to help us live a disciplined life without sliding into dry legalism or fundamentalism.
- We've asked ourselves where we take our counsel and good advice in life from
- We've investigated silence and solitude – disciplines of the inner life
- Last week we thought about the discipline of study, and getting rooted in the Word of God

This week – it's a discipline of 'engagement' – where you 'take on' something which is for your benefit, although perhaps not always a natural thing to do. The Discipline of Fellowship.

#### What is fellowship?

By 'fellowship' I mean deliberately coming together with other Christians to 'do life' together, to share ourselves, and to share our faith journey together.

To some extent, that means the corporate acts that we engage in as 'church' – like worship together, prayer, celebration, service, sharing our giftings and so forth. It means sharing the highs and lows of life with each other, in settings like small groups, accountability groups, prayer groups etc. It might involve coming together once a week in a big setting like this morning, or in small settings like someone's front room, or even like the Men's curry night in this week's notices.

Fellowship involves coming together, to support and sustain each other. To do this Christian life as 'team' not as individuals.

Early days of the believers in Acts (2:42-47) they knew about fellowship:

They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. 43Everyone was filled with awe, and many wonders and miraculous signs were done by the apostles. 44All the believers were together and had everything in common. 45Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need. 46Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favour of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.

**Fellowship** – Dictionary **definition** (Shorter Oxford) – companionship, friendship, participation, sharing, community of interest, a body of associates, a brotherhood or fraternity.

#### Why is fellowship a discipline?

The dictionary definition sounds very nice, and normal too. Friendship. Participation, sharing etc. All good things, all things we like do be a part of. But think about that carefully – in your life, where do you *really* have that depth of 'fellowship'? Where do you really find friendship, companions for the journey, a brother/sisterhood, a community of shared interest? A place to know and be known?

**That kind of experience is what God has always intended for his creation.** God the Trinity itself lives in community, in fellowship with each other – Father, Holy Spirit and Son. The beginning of Genesis – that Garden of Eden – shows us that when humans were made in the image of the Trinity,

God's plan was always that humankind live intimate lives, in community, in close contact, and knowing God in the midst of life.

The reality of life today is different – we live in a fallen world, where communities are in breakdown, where intimacy is undermined, where the unit of the family has to struggle to keep the bond of community together. But part of God's salvation for our world – his setting things right, turning things around – is to redress some of this balance. And the discipline of fellowship is about being *intentional* in finding and revelling in great community, intimacy, friendship, sharing, knowing and being known. That's part of what God's salvation is about – experiencing that depth of fellowship again.

**And it's a *discipline*, exactly because in the modern age, it no longer comes easily to us.**

### **'Modern Life is Rubbish' (Blur song)**

In life today, you may not realise it (because the devil's tricks are very subtle), but authentic community, friendship, sharing, openness, non-judgemental acceptance are very hard to find. The structures of the modern world often work against community. For example, **the family unit** is designed to be a strong bond, a place of belonging, a place to return to for strength and building-up. But increasingly family members are spread around all over the country or even the world, as we settle for jobs, careers, retirement etc. Think yourself lucky if you have family nearby, because its getting increasingly uncommon. Make the most of it!! Mine & Marjorie's family members are spread all over the world - We have to work v hard to keep communication going, but really our closest companions, friends, fellowship is not with our family – its with our Christian friends

Other families, sadly, suffer from breakdowns and splits. The family unit of togetherness has perhaps never been so under fire. The unit of fellowship through strong family is not *necessarily* there for us.

What else in the modern world subtly works against this God-given pattern of fellowship and community? **The busyness of life.** The sheer number of options we have, the number of things to do. At any given time, you might have 20 or 30 different options with which to fill your time – to do, or to go to. But rarely do these activities, and the people we meet at them actually overlap and bring continuity. There might be taking the kids to football, going to the pub for a meal, walking in the park, picking up the kids from school, doing the pub quiz, shopping in Meadowhall, watching Sheffield United or Wednesday, putting on the telly, going to work, having a drink with your mates after work, going to Kings Kids..... the list goes on!

All of these activities can be fun, and usually involve being around other people – but they are different groups of people, there is little cross-over. They are compartmentalised, set into different groups – fragmented – one set of acquaintances at the school gates, another set at the gym, another at Kings Kids, another at work.

We know lots of people. Lots of groups. But where is the depth of relationship? Where are you *really known*? **Where are your friends – not just acquaintances?** Where, when you are asked 'How are you?' Can you reply honestly, rather than the standard 'I'm fine thanks!' ?

Are we depending on each other? People in the developing world today etc (and Acts) were dependent on each other. But in our society we aren't dependent on each other (eg. you don't NEED each other – at least financially.) We live isolated lives.

This situation applies to men and women. Speaking as a guy, I used to have some mates at work, and they would be good for a chat, good for a beer after work, good for the occasional chat about football, but not good at opening up and being honest with each other. There are barriers in the working relationship which usually stop people from opening up, and finding real fellowship. But there is a difference between being mates and friends. There is a difference between knowing someone as an acquaintance and knowing and sharing with someone intimately. Your mates might be good for a laugh, but your friends are good for a crisis.

**In many ways, our modern world actually gets in the way of us forming deep, loving, giving relationships with others.** But we are members of the upside-down kingdom of God, a kingdom designed to address these kind of deficiencies, and address it in an upside-down kind of way.

Jesus of course knew this, and he knew the human condition very well. He summed up the two greatest commandments, the two greatest foundations of how Christians should live their lives:

- Love God with everything
- Love your neighbour as you love yourself

Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength. 'The second is this: 'Love your neighbour as yourself.' There is no commandment greater than these." (Matt 12:30-31)

**God calls us to deep relationships.** Both with Himself, and with others around us. That's what those 2 commandments imply. Both with Christians and people not yet Christians.

Jesus surrounded himself with a small group of close disciples, who later became friends. They did life together for 3 years. The Apostle Paul appears to have had a few really key friends with whom he shared real fellowship, the ups-and-downs of life. He describes Timothy as "my son whom I love" (1 Cor 4:17), "our brother" (1 Thes 3:2) and they certainly shared the walk of discipleship together – later when he writes to Timothy he says "You, however, know all about my teaching, my way of life, my purpose, faith, patience, love, endurance, persecutions, sufferings—what kinds of things happened to me.." (2 Tim 3:10). They shared the Christian life together, they shared the trials and the triumphs, they describe each other as family.

## The local church community

That's the vision – fellowship, sharing, community, family, a body of believers

Some of what I'm stressing today is about community. But there is an important aspect of corporate CHURCH activity too. It is very healthy to come together as Christians and worship, seek god, be a body, be in contact. If you are going to function best as a Christian, you really need to be coming together regularly with other Christians, and living out a balance together of UP IN and OUT – worship, fellowship, mission. God designed the Xian life in a way that requires regular and deep interaction with those other people who share it. This is simply how it works – each given gifts for the common good

- READ 1 Cor 12:4-13

Fellowship – meeting and sharing yourselves - is required to allow your spiritual gifts to be fully realised! So just focussing on the individual stuff (incl gifts) isn't enough, they come to fullness in community!

For example, individuals might have particular gifts in healing or faith, and they can **share it** with you – when you are sick, or lacking in faith for a season If YOU want to be actively growing in the spiritual life and spiritual gifts – you need to be sharing them with other Christians and non-Christians. This is what differentiates us from the hippy commune down the road, or the bowls club etc – they might have good friendships too, but the probably lack the dynamic spirit of God moving amongst them.

Here's a summary quote from Dallas Willard - "The members of the body must be in contact, if they are to sustain and be sustained by each other (*Spirit of the Disciplines* p.194). Likewise - Jesus' prayer shortly before he died was that his followers 'might be one'. Marjorie and I don't hold back on how important we believe it is to be in corporate church at celebration level, and in small community level, and 1-2-1 accountability within the church.

## **Here's why**

**The local church**, when it is functioning well, **is perhaps the most outrageous, forgiving, healing, welcoming and redemptive community known to mankind**. In my experience, there is nothing to match a local Christian community when its acting in the way Jesus set.

And when you think about it, that's hardly surprising, because the Church is the body of Christ on earth – Christ's agents. So when we get it right, when we operate by His Spirit, and act-out the kind of kingdom life to for which we were created, then no other human construction is going to be able to match it!

What do I mean? – STORIES FROM PEOPLE IN KC...

KC is very good at this as a whole – one of the best churches we've ever experienced at some of the community aspects (eg. meals for new mums), and at gathering around church people at times of need. Sometimes its like a machine that rolls into action – babysitting, meals, phone calls, practical help and love.

- Where else can one find a community like this in Britain today?
  - o In the mates down the pub?
  - o In the gym, or the Mother's Union, or the Trade Union?
  - o Your friends in the band, or the choir, or the football team?
  - o Nowhere – because Christian fellowship is so full of love, of *giving away* – that it is at times totally upside-down to the self-focussed way the world operates.

We all need fellowship. We all benefit from it. And we are all changed for the better by being a part of it. Even more, its actually part God's plan for redeeming the society around us too – for sharing with them the upside-down way of sharing life together.

## **Not just for Sundays**

Fellowship isn't just Sundays. In fact, lets be honest with the size of the group on a Sunday, distracts etc, its not at its best in terms of personal interaction. Join a Small Group. Get accountable – with 1 or 2 other people of same sex, and meet regularly to share the highs and lows of being disciples. To be people who live in the light.

## **Why is it a discipline, and how to get into it more?**

Things get in the way – of doing fellowship together, and of being intimate with people.

**As with all the disciplines – you need to be intentional about doing them.** And sometimes, because we only have a fixed amount of time in our lives, you have to be willing to give up another activity in order to do them. The temptation, even when you are in 'fellowship' is not to go deep, open up – especially for men. Even when you are sitting in front of someone who you trust and know, and there's something burning-up inside of you that you desperately want to tell them..... sometimes its very hard to say it!

I can't force you to open up, but I can suggest that it will be for all our benefits. Here's what the bible has to say about it:

**The first thing it says is that we are in this together!** In the Old Testament we see 'the people of God' – a holy nation. The Hebrew faith from which we take our roots was very much a corporate faith – more so than our modern day society can really comprehend.

In the New Testament we hear the growing new community of believers described as a vine, and a body. "From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work." (Eph 4:16). We're all in it together. We need each other, and when we share and work for each other, we build ourselves and other people up in love. In fact, love is a crucial element in fellowship. If you are getting together with other Christians but are not actively working to love them, to want the best for them, to value them and respect them, then the bible says you are not in the light, but in darkness:

"Anyone who claims to be in the light but hates his brother is still in the darkness. Whoever loves his brother lives in the light, and there is nothing in him to make him stumble. But whoever hates his brother is in the darkness and walks around in the darkness; he does not know where he is going, because the darkness has blinded him." (1 John 2:9-11)

**So we are called to look out for each other, and love our neighbours.**

A lot of problems in modern life are caused by isolation. People are lonely, stressed, trying to cope – but one of the problems is that you're trying to do it all by yourself, or not asking for help. How late do we want leave it? When the person announces to the group that they are in massive debt, getting divorced, viewing pornography every day on the internet - or do we share lives *earlier* and help each other earlier, and live in the light together, so that we might be healed.

Sometimes, being in true fellowship is a place where confession can occur. Confession is a separate spiritual discipline, which we'll deal with another time, but sometimes it is necessary and good for us to open up to another person or two about the realities of our lives, and our sins, in order that we live in the light and get healed up.

"He who conceals his sins does not prosper, but whoever confesses and renounces them finds mercy." (Prov 28:13)

"And the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well; the Lord will raise him up. If he has sinned, he will be forgiven. Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective." (James 5:15-16)

**Fellowship can be a powerful source and place of healing.**

## **Summary**

The King's Centre is an evangelical church. It stresses that a 'personal relationship with God' is something very important for us as Christians. This, of course, is crucial. But it's deficient to stick to just the evangelical 'personal relationship with God'. But we are made to be part of a body. We're designed to live in community as believers. To share, to learn together, to related to God together as well as individually.

To find a place of healing, acceptance, growth, encouragement and when its right, a place to challenge us together. To know and be known.

So I would encourage you today to think again about the spiritual discipline of fellowship. And don't be tempted to settle for relationships without depth. Don't be tempted to shy away from living in the light – from bearing your soul to a small number of other trusted Christians, because that's one of the ways God can heal us and make us more whole.

The body of Christ is a beautiful thing. There is nothing quite like it when its working well. We all fit into it somewhere, and we're all invited into it by the head of the body – Jesus Christ.

“Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful. And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds. Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching.” (Hew 10:23-25)

So, I would encourage you to make fellowship, in all its facets, a priority in your life.