

'Being the Church' - Part 7

by Rev. Robert Griffith

Over the past couple of months we've been exploring what it looks like to really *be the Church*. This requires some study and serious reflection because the church which we have experienced for many generations now is radically different to the Church which Jesus birthed so long ago. So if we truly want to know what *being the Church* means from Jesus' perspective, we have to look beyond the corrupted visible 'church' we have all inherited from our forebears and known all our lives.

Now you might think 'corrupted' is too strong a word, but I actually wish I had a stronger word to describe how a dynamic, Spirit-led, Christ-centred, relational community could be transformed so radically into what is, more often than not, an event-based, task-centred, rule-governed religion. Or in other cases the Church has been reduced to a socio-political welfare agency with no reference to Christ or the gospel. You simply cannot look seriously at the early Church and the modern Church without scratching your head and wondering, "*What on earth happened?*"

Let me give you a snapshot again of how it was when all of this began – this thing we call 'Church' - to which we all profess to belong. I just want you to imagine what this was like, how it worked, where it happened, how it felt, what impact it had on the people who were part of this miracle and the people watching on in the community. You've read and heard this passage many times, but please don't allow familiarity to rob you of the impact of what is actually happening to and through these people, our pioneers, our ancient brothers and sisters in Christ.

As promised by Jesus, the Holy Spirit came on the day of Pentecost and things got very messy, very exciting and very real - and here's the result. Peter got up and told everybody what was really happening and how this was all part of God's plan and how this was exactly what Jesus came to create – a new community of faith – a new covenant of love and grace – and thousands of people said, "*Yes, please! Count me in!*" Then this new thing we call the Church, began to take shape as ...

"... They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Everyone was filled with awe at the many wonders and signs performed by the apostles. All the believers were together and had everything in common. They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need. Every 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." (Acts 2:42-47)

I've read that passage thousands of times and still, it makes the hairs on the back of my neck stand up, as I anticipate what that must have been like and as I dream of the day it might be like that again – a day when religion is finally sent back to the hell it came from and the community of faith which Jesus died to establish re-emerges in our midst with Jesus and His mission right in the centre.

In our last time together we talked about our devotion to the Apostles' teaching, which for us is the New Testament, and how important it was for us to connect with all that Jesus did and taught and then passed on to the Apostles. Today I want us to begin exploring a much more challenging devotion – one which takes a lifetime to do really well – but one which so defined this new Christian community. I am talking about their devotion to *fellowship*.

The Greek word translated as fellowship is *koinonia* and Acts 2 is the first time we encounter this word in the New Testament. This word 'fellowship' has been used beyond the confines of the Church in our modern era – but it shouldn't have been. This word is a Christian word as this fellowship is the unique fellowship we have together in Christ. This is far more than a casual association or a club membership or having your name on a roll. ***Koinonia* fellowship is God-ordained, Christ-centred and Spirit-led.** It only exists where the Church exists and it speaks to the heart of this new movement which began over 2,000 years ago. This radical concept of fellowship and interdependence flies in the face of the individualism which dominates our society and that only highlights our need to re-connect with the true nature of the Church.

For millions of Christians today across the world, church life consists of a Sunday worship service and that's all - and even for those involved in a small group of some kind, the true purpose and importance of that small group is not fully understood by many. Now I firmly believe in the tremendous value of communal celebration and worship on Sunday, or any day, and I believe that solid teaching times are crucial for depth and strength. But you simply can't read the New Testament and come away thinking that group gatherings in an auditorium once a week are the sum total of what Church is supposed to be.

In fact, such gatherings, which are the primary expression of the Christian Church across much of the world today, can't be found in their current form anywhere in the New Testament – that foundational document upon which the Church stands!

So let's look more closely now at this wonderful concept, captured by the Greek word *koinonia*. This word appears 19 times in the New Testament and this is the first time. It literally means 'common' or 'communal' and it signifies a close relationship, a sharing together, a participation, an intimacy. Now the word *koinonia* may only appear once in the passage I read from Acts 2, but the concept of *koinonia* runs through almost every sentence of this wonderful description of the Church.

"They devoted themselves ... to fellowship (koinonia) .. All the believers were together (koinonia) and had everything in common. (koinonia) Every day they continued to meet together (koinonia)... They broke bread in their homes (koinonia) and ate together (koinonia) with glad and sincere hearts ..."

At the very heart of this new community of faith was *koinonia* – rich, personal, intimate, daily fellowship. So what brought them together in this close bond of fellowship? Not sport, music, hobbies, race, gender, jobs, economics, education, personalities, social status – no, nothing in this world created that special 'togetherness'. What brought them together was their shared life in Jesus Christ! Fellowship wasn't merely a social activity, shooting the breeze or hanging out together. Not that there's anything wrong with that, and that is often the starting point of true *koinonia* fellowship, but we need to realise that just socialising isn't what the Bible portrays as fellowship.

Fellowship also isn't a place or a description of a group. We can call this Church a 'Christian Fellowship' but that doesn't guarantee that *koinonia* is actually taking place. It's more than a place and it's more than an event. Fellowship is our common, shared life in Jesus Christ. Fellowship is not a label – it's an experience.

In 1 John 1:3 we read:

"We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard, so that you also may have fellowship with us. And our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ."

Any gathering of the Church that leaves Jesus out is not *koinonia*, it's not true fellowship. For something to qualify as fellowship, the manifest presence of Christ has to be evident. True fellowship begins with God. In the book of Acts they were called 'believers'. The glue that brings us together, holds us together, and keeps us together is Jesus Christ and our faith and belief in Him and His finished work of salvation. Look at what the Apostle Paul says about what happened to you when your eyes were opened to the reality of your Salvation in Christ.

"Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow citizens with God's people and members of God's household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit." (Eph. 2:19-22)

When we become believers, our eyes are opened to the union we have with Jesus Christ, we recognise that we are part of God's family and as such, we become aware of a whole household of brothers and sisters. When we have fellowship with Jesus Christ, the dynamic of that relationship is meant to outflow into many relationships – into fellowship with each other. 1 John 1:7 says

"If we walk in the light, as He is in the light, we have fellowship one with another."

So, in this modern era, is it even possible to live together in a close, caring community like we see in the early Church? What keeps this passage in Acts 2 from being a fairy tale from a lost era - an idealistic dream - instead of a 21st century reality? Can this imperfect group of forgiven believers really live together in community and intimacy? The Bible says we can.

God has designed us for closeness in the Church Jesus promised to build and He wants us to make the effort to BE TOGETHER as often as we can. Being together is God's way of building *koinonia* in practical, visible, and tangible ways in the Church. The New Testament stresses our involvement in this 'together' dynamic with a key truth captured in the recurring phrase 'one another'.

Just in case we miss the importance of fellowship and relating to each other, there are over thirty five 'one another' statements in the New Testament. As you read them now, don't let them be 'theology' or 'doctrine' or a dry list in someone's sermon. I want you to imagine what these concepts could actually look like and feel like in your life and in the lives of those around you who claim to be your brothers and sisters in Christ. I want you to dream about the kind of Church we will be when these statements are actually observations of who we are – rather than who we might like to be.

Fellowship with one another - 1 John 1:5-7

Confess your sins to one another - James 5:16

Offer hospitality to one another - 1 Peter 4:9

Clothe yourselves with humility toward one another - 1 Peter 5:5

Do not lie to one another - Colossians 3:9

Comfort and encourage one another - 1 Thessalonians 4:18; 5:1

Spur one another to good deeds - Hebrews 10:24

Do not slander one another - James 4:1

Do not grumble at one another - James 5:9

Agree with one another - 1 Corinthians 1:10

Serve one another - 1 Corinthians 9:19 - 2 Corinthians 4:5 - Galatians 5:13

Have equal concern for one another - 1 Corinthians 12:25

Do not be conceited, provoking and envying one another - Galatians 5:26

Restore one another - Galatians 6:1

Bear with one another - Ephesians 4:2 - Colossians 3:13

Be kind to one another - Ephesians 4:32 - 1 Thessalonians 5:15

Sing to one another - Ephesians 5:19-20

Submit to one another - Ephesians 5:21

Wash one another's feet - John 13:14

Live in peace with one another - Romans 12:16 - 1 Thessalonians 5:13 - 1 Peter 3:8

Honour one another - Romans 12:10 - Philippians 2:3

Stop judging one another - Romans 14:13

Accept one another - Romans 15:7

Teach and admonish one another - Romans 15:14 - Colossians 3:16

Greet one another with a holy kiss - Romans 16:16 - 1 Cor. 16:20 - 2 Cor. 13:12 - 1 Peter 5:14

Love one another - John 13:34-35

Now, let me ask you something: Can all those 'one anothers' happen in just one worship service a week? No, of course they can't. That list itself demands a community of faith which shares its life together, just as they did when our Church was born! Sunday worship gatherings have a purpose. This is where our congregation gathers together in celebration and corporate worship and to receive teaching and to celebrate communion and to share *some* fellowship. It is certainly not meant to be the only thing that happens each week for those who belong to the family of God.

Just imagine if we had only spent an hour or two once a week with our own families all those years we were together. What kind of relationship would we have with each other? How close would we be? How united in purpose would we be? How loved and appreciated and encouraged would we feel? How much would we be able to give to one another? How much would we even know each other? Well, so it is with the family of God – the community of faith – the Church. Without the willingness to be involved in the lives of others, neither you nor they will grow and become the wondrous miracle the Church is meant to be.

Ok, that's the easy part! Essential as it is to identify the need (some don't even bother doing that) ... the hard part is addressing that need by making different choices to the ones we've made in the past. That's the only way things change. That's the only way anything can improve or grow or mature or become more fruitful – by people deciding to make different choices. Those choices could be as simple as deciding to invite someone from your Church to your place for a meal to get to know them and their story and grow closer to them in their spiritual journey in Christ. Then invite someone different next time. Maybe make it a monthly thing. How hard could that be? Let me tell you that if everyone in this congregation decided to do just that and nothing more, the Spirit of God would move through this church family like a fire!

If hosting a meal is too much for you, then a cup of tea and a biscuit for morning or afternoon tea is more than enough reason to gather together and give God an opportunity to show you what *koinonia* fellowship really feels like! You could even meet down town for a cuppa at a café if you are not comfortable hosting people at home.

Now one of those different choices might be to join a home group, where you can meet regularly with some of your brothers and sisters and unpack the teaching from Sunday and share our lives together and learn from God through each other and studying the Bible. Every Church which is thriving across all denominations has a vibrant home group ministry.

There are many aspects to *being the Church*, but at the centre of them all – at the very heart of this organic, dynamic miracle of God, is *koinonia* – real fellowship: a dynamic, Spirit-led, gospel-centred, relational community.

From the moment the Church was born, we have been presented with a choice every day of our lives: *relationship or religion*. Every morning as your feet hit the floor and you begin a brand new day, you have that same choice before you: relationship or religion. Our relationship with God and each other is what defines us as His people, His disciples, His Church and if those relationships are growing, deepening and strengthening, then so will the Church. God guarantees it.

Do we want our Church to impact the community around us? Do we want to see God adding to our number daily like He did when all this began? Some people should answer no, to be honest, because some people might be comfortable with our Church as it is, as they have experienced it for many years. But those who answer yes and genuinely want to see the Lord add to our number, must face the challenge God is presenting to us today, and every day.

If we want a different outcome, we need to make different choices. There's nothing very spiritual about that truth, but when applied to spiritual matters like the spread of the gospel and the health of the Church, the outcome will be life-changing as the community around us will be transformed by the power of God.

How devoted are we to fellowship, to *koinonia*, to the community of faith which Jesus promised to build, not the institution which man has built in Jesus' name? May God help us answer that question in the days ahead and may we have the courage to make some different choices and thereby become the answers to our own prayers for our community and our nation.