

Fellowship and the Church

by Zac Poonen

The church is not just a building or denomination, but a fellowship of people called out by God to live in dependence on Him and fellowship with one another.

Scripture: Ephesians 1:22

Topics: "Unity in the Church", "Fellowship"

Description

Zac Poonen emphasizes the vital role of fellowship within the church, asserting that transformation into Christ's likeness occurs in community rather than isolation. He explains that the church is the Body of Christ, called out to represent Him collectively to the world, and that believers must seek a local church that aligns with New Testament principles. Poonen warns against the dangers of sectarianism and encourages openness to all who love the Lord, while also stressing the importance of unity and love among believers to combat division and fulfill God's purpose. Ultimately, he highlights that true fellowship requires self-denial and a commitment to mutual support, as it is through unity that the church can effectively manifest God's glory.

Transcript

We have already seen that God wants to transform us into the likeness of Christ. But this transformation doesn't take place in us in isolation from other disciples of Jesus. It is only along with them that we are transformed.

God wants us to live, not only in dependence on Him, but in fellowship with one another as well. In Old Testament times, God worked through individuals - a Moses or an Elijah or a John the Baptist etc.,

But under the new covenant what God wants is a Body of disciples who have become one under the headship of Christ. This is what 'the church' is - the Body of Christ (Eph. 1:22,23; 2:14-16).

The Church - The Body of Christ

The church is not a building, nor is it a denomination. The English word 'church' in the New Testament is a translation of the Greek word 'ekklesia', which means an assembly of people who are called out - in this case, called out of the world to be God's own possession.

All over the world, those who have responded to God's call to be separated from sin and the world, form the church - the Body of Christ. In every locality, these members of Christ's Body should together become

a local expression of that body.

The first body of Christ was the physical body in which Jesus came to earth. In that body God showed Himself to the world. Jesus yielded Himself so perfectly to the Father, that at the end of His life He could say, "He who has seen Me has seen the Father" (Jn. 14:9).

Now our calling is to represent Jesus together, to the world around us. No one can represent Jesus adequately, all by himself. We need one another. The best among us are still imbalanced. We have our strong points, but we have our weak points too. We may be able to reflect Christ well in one area, but very poorly in another area. But together, we will find that the strong points of one balance out the weak points of the other. And if we live in love and submission to one another, Christ can be reflected in His totality through us, to an unbelieving world. This is God's purpose for the church.

Becoming Part Of A Local Church

As soon as you're converted, you need to seek out and join a fellowship of disciples who are eager to obey God's Word and to follow in Jesus' footsteps.

This is where the new convert can be bewildered by the numerous groups and denominations that he sees in Christendom. From one end of the doctrinal spectrum to the other, there are unfortunately, many, many groups that lay claim to be the only true representatives of Christ on earth!!

Many of these groups would thump their Bibles and prove to you that you cannot be a part of the Body of Christ unless you join them!

It would be almost impossible to convince most of them that God has many children who are not in their 'group' and who don't hold exactly to their peculiar forms of doctrine! Such is the power of prejudice! You must be careful that you don't get entangled in this web of Pharisaism and cultism, that plagues much of Christendom today.

Keep your heart open to all who love the Lord and who seek to follow Him in sincerity. They may not dot their doctrinal 'i's or cross their doctrinal 't's in exactly the same way as you do. But that's not serious, if they're walking in the light that God has given them. We cannot demand that they should walk in the light that God has given us.

Receiving All Of God's Children

We must have as many brothers and sisters as God has children.

We should wholeheartedly welcome and receive all whom God Himself has received (Rom. 14:1; 15:7). If Jesus is not ashamed to call someone His brother, we shouldn't be ashamed either (Heb. 2:11).

There are two extremes to which believers can go, in this matter of fellowship. One is to compromise truth itself in order to maintain fellowship. The other is to demand uniformity in all matters before fellowship is offered. If you are wise, you'll steer clear of both these extremes.

It's obvious that we can't work together with those who are not agreed as to how God's work is to be done. But we don't have to demand that someone believes exactly as we do, down to the last little detail, before we have fellowship with him. There is a difference between working together with someone and having fellowship with him.

However, you must look for a church in your locality, that can be a spiritual home for you, and to which you can be committed.

The New-Testament Church

In the midst of many `churches' in your locality, you should look for one that conforms most closely to the New Testament, as you have understood it thus far. As time goes on, and you understand more of the New Testament, you may feel that you have to leave that 'church' and join another which is more in line with God's Word.

That will only be natural for one who is growing spiritually and who is determined to press on to God's highest and best for His life. Never settle for anything less than God's best in every area - and then you won't have any regrets in eternity.

A New Testament church will not have any denominational label. It is a fellowship of people who have been gathered by the Holy Spirit into the Name of Jesus Christ. The Lord has promised to be present only in the midst of such a gathering (Matt. 18:20).

The church that you become a part of, should be one that accepts the Bible as God's Word and as the ONLY foundation for faith and life. Many cultistic groups, though claiming to accept the Bible alone as their authority, are often found quoting the writings of their leaders with equal authority. As you get close to them you'll find that they are more bound to the teachings of their leaders than to God's Word. There may be many good things in them. But if you join them, you will soon find that their cultistic attitudes enslave you.

In God's church, all believers are equally priests of God - for God has made us all priests (1 Pet. 2:9). A `church' that has a special class of priests or `pastors', who alone are considered qualified to minister the Word, is contrary to the will of God.

God has ordained the leadership of the church to be in the hands of elders (always more than one). But these elders need not be `full-time workers' (Acts 14:23; Tit. 1:5).

In the meetings of a New Testament church, the main emphasis will be on preaching God's Word. All believers will have freedom in such a church to share God's Word according to their maturity and their spiritual gift.

If the Word spoken is truly inspired by the Holy Spirit, you'll find that it comforts and challenges and builds up and exposes `the secrets of men's hearts' compelling those who hear to acknowledge that God is speaking (1Cor. 14:3, 24-31).

The main thrust of a truly New Testament church will be to make disciples and to teach them total obedience to Jesus' commandments (Matt. 28:19,20). The distinguishing feature of such a church will be mutual love between its members - as Jesus stated in John 13:35, "By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."

Such a church where the Word is spoken powerfully, and where the love of God reigns and where the presence of the Lord can be sensed, is the church that you should be a part of, in your locality.

The Importance of Fellowship

It's when we try to live together in loving fellowship with others that we'll find how much we need to deny ourselves and take up the cross every day, if we want to maintain fellowship.

Satan is always busy driving wedges between God's children. If we are mature we'll always be alert to prevent those wedges from being driven in between us and others. There is great loss when fellowship is broken in Christ's Body - both to God as well as to us.

There is tremendous power in unity in the church. Satan can be overcome only by a united church. Jesus said "If even two believers are totally one in their spirits, completely united, they can ask the Father for anything and their request will be granted - because I am present in power, wherever any two or three such united souls are gathered together by the Holy Spirit. And such a fellowship of believers can bind Satanic forces in the heavenlies and on earth and thus restrain Satan's power. They can also release people from Satan's bondage through their prayers " (Matt. 18:18-20 - free paraphrase).

That's why Satan brings division between believers and that's why he forms cliques and groups in a church. He wants to preserve his own kingdom from being attacked by a united church. We must be alert to Satan's schemes and not be ignorant of them.

Just think what limitation there would have been in Christ's physical body if his limbs had been unable to work together. He would not then have been able to manifest the glory of God to this world as He did. This is the limitation that Christ faces today as Head of His spiritual Body, the church, when believers are divided.

We lose too. If you cut yourself off from even one of God's children, you deprive yourself of something of God's riches that could have come to you only through that other child of God. We can know the love of Christ only along "with all the saints" (Eph. 3:17-19).

(For a further in-depth study of the importance of Christian fellowship, you could read my book entitled, ONE BODY IN CHRIST.)

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