

**Core Seminar**

**Living as a Church**

**Class 6: Church Fellowship**

*Building a Bond of Unity*

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I. Introduction

Think of all the places where people experience any sort of fellowship and community. The tailgate party at a football game… the barbershop… the water cooler at the office… the family reunion… the local church. Acts 2:42 says that the early Christians “devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.” That leads us to a question I want us to discuss as we begin: What makes Christian fellowship different from worldly friendships and relationships?

All of these answers point us to the heart of what makes Christian fellowship different: it’s based on Christlike love.

In the first few weeks of this class we’ve looked at how unity is formed in the church, through the foundation of the new identity that we all share in Christ all the way through various aspects of our life together, from church membership, to preaching, prayer and the way we govern the church. Today, we’ll be discussing fellowship within the church – specifically, how church members love each other based on the bond of unity that God has formed in us. What do relationships look like in a spiritual, supernatural community?

Next week, we’ll look at the negative side -- how to deal with discontentment in the church when fellowship isn’t going well. But before we get there we want to state positively what our fellowship should look like for us to have unity and a compelling witness to the watching world.

**II. What Characterizes Healthy Relationships in the Church?**

So, let’s first consider the question of how we, as Christians, should relate to each other. Specifically: “what characterizes healthy relationships in the church?” The answer is both simple and profound: it’s love. In a word, Christlike *love* is what makes our fellowship distinct from every other earthly community. Jesus said in John 13, “*A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.*” (John 13:34-35)

Why is love important? Because God is glorified when people who have little else in common but Christ live together in genuine love. This is what Paul is so excited about in chapter 3 of Ephesians – that previously clashing peoples, Jew and Gentile, are now one unified family in the church. This supernatural reconciliation brings the angels in heaven to their knees in awe.

Think about it: why does God showcase his glory to the world through our love in the church? Because our love models, if only by pale reflection, the unity of love in the triune God. This is exactly what Jesus prays for to the Father in John 17:22-23:

“*The glory that you have given me I have given to them, that they may be one even as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become perfectly one, so that the world may know that you sent me and loved them* ***even as you loved me****.”*

Our love for each other, rooted in our commonality in Christ, is a picture of the loving unity of the Godhead.

***Brief Overview of Christian Love***

So, if the key aspect of Christian fellowship is love, let’s spend a moment thinking about what love involves. Love is such a common word and concept that we’ve got to make sure it doesn’t become meaningless. Jonathan Edwards’ simple definition is helpful here: love is “that disposition or affection by which one is dear to another.” As Christians, we are dear to one another because we are dear to God. Being God’s child involves loving what God loves. And God loves the church, so much so that he purchased her with his own blood. God’s love models, then, that love isn’t merely an emotion or feeling – it is a disposition toward another that expresses itself in concrete action to bring about that person’s ultimate good.

If that’s what love is, I want us to notice a few things. First, Christian love is hard. Love begins with our hearts, and our hearts are the hardest place of all because we’re sinners. Why are there so many exhortations in the New Testament for Christians to love each other? Because we need to be told again and again to do this! In our flesh, we prefer ease to a hard conversation. We prefer relaxing to serving. We prefer having our needs met to giving our preferences up. And the people we’re called to love are sinners too. They let us down, say awkward and insensitive things, resist our counsel… which, incidentally, should help us appreciate more how patient and merciful Christ is with us, because we do the same.

But the second point is that, while Christian love can be difficult, we can show such love because of God’s grace. We love because God first loved us (1 John 4:19). What does that mean? Is it quid pro quo? Like “I’ll invite him for dinner because he invited me last week?” No - it means that our ability to love comes from God’s love for us. God is both the source and model for our love. Again, Edwards puts it well: “It is from the breathings of the [Holy] Spirit that the Christian's love arises, both towards God and men. The Spirit of God is a spirit of love. And therefore when the Spirit of God enters into the soul, love enters. God is love, and he who has God dwelling in him by his Spirit will have love dwelling in him. “

The most spectacular way that God has shown us His love is in giving us His one and only Son so that we might not perish but have everlasting life. So in 1 John 3:16, we read:

“By this we know love, that he laid down his life for us, and we ought to lay down our lives for the brothers.”

In other words, we can’t approach maturity in loving others unless we strive for maturity in grasping the dimensions of God’s love. The more we appreciate the magnitude of love Christ has shown us by dying for each and every one of our sins, the more our lives will be characterized by love. Do you want to become more loving? Jesus said, “he who has been forgiven little loves little” (Lk 7:47); when we know how much we’ve been forgiven, then our love overflows.

And the third aspect of Christian love: it brings great joy. It’s not only hard for sinners to love – it’s supremely worth it. Loving others doesn’t just do them good, it brings us the kind of sturdy satisfaction we were created to long for. Psalm 133:1 says “How good and pleasant it is when brothers live together in unity.” What does John say in 2 John 12 when he’s writing to a church he knows well? “I have much to write to you, but I do not want to use paper and ink. Instead, I hope to visit you and talk with you face to face, so that our joy may be complete.”

III. What Does Loving Fellowship Look Like?

Well, keeping these important principles in mind, I want to spend the rest of the class considering how, practically, we can fulfill this command to love one another inside the church. When our fellowship is marked by Christ-like love, what kind of fellowship will it be? We’re going to identify six aspects of loving fellowship.

6 Aspects of Loving Fellowship

(1) Fellowship in Diversity: Love Seeks Understanding

As we’ve already discussed in this seminar, the church’s fellowship is unique because it involves a diverse assortment of people all united around Christ. What does this mean for our relationships in the church? It means that love seeks understanding. Love reaches out to those different from you – those who are “dear” to you because of the gospel – and seeks to understand their hopes and dreams, struggles and sins, backgrounds and battles. It seeks reconciliation where there’s been alienation, and warm friendship where the world has drawn lines of separation.

This is why James 2 is so adamant that we shouldn’t show personal favoritism. It’s why Paul says in Romans 12:16, not to be proud but “be willing to associate with people of low position.”

So, can you imagine a church like this? A community where people put in the effort to make real, substantive friendships with those who have a different cultural background, who aren’t in the same age range, are in a different stage of life, have a different personality – all with Christ at the center? We talked about this extensively a few weeks ago – I won’t repeat what we said then, but I do want to give a couple of cautions. One – beware tokenism. What I mean is, don’t pursue someone different from you *only* to check your personal diversity box. No, pursue them because Christ died for them and because you want to see them grow.

And second, be sensitive as to how you go about getting to know people who are different, recognizing that your way of pursuing a friendship with them comes from your own personality and culture. A good piece of feedback I got after the last class on this was to remember that if you tend to ask people a long list of questions to get to know them, that can be intimidating for some people; if you always begin by asking someone where’d you move here from and where they went to school, that assumes they’re not from here and that they went to school – but those things aren’t true of everyone! Just something to keep in mind.

Praise God that there are so many examples of love across boundaries in our church: I think of Homere Whyte inviting families over for dinner when he was a single college student; the group that met recently to talk about the book *Bloodlines* and racial reconciliation; how Maxine Zopf is a regular at bridal showers full of younger women - I could go on.

(2) Fellowship in Service: Love Requires Sacrifice

Second, our fellowship should be characterized by sacrificial love – it’s a community of those who come together not to be served but to serve. Listen to 1 John 4:10-11:

“In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins. Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another.”

One way we can do this at CHBC is by carrying each other’s burdens, as Paul says to do in Gal 6:2. Our own church Covenant states that we agree to “bear each other’s burdens and sorrows.” How? This means we come alongside someone in a time of challenge - spiritual, physical, you name it - and literally help carry their load. It may involve patiently bearing with someone’s spiritual struggles for a prolonged period of time in a discipling relationship. It may mean providing material help to someone who is in need - groceries, a loan, a ride, childcare. It may be giving up your Friday nights to visit someone who is sick. Service in the church can certainly involve volunteering for things – childcare, sound, childcare, hospitality, childcare... but if you’re the type of person who loves to sign up to “get stuff done” at church, let me encourage you not to ignore the kind of service that happens mainly in personal relationships which often takes more time and can be messy.

Again, this is by God’s grace a normal thing in our church - from the well-oiled machine of providing meals for families who have just had a child or are in a time of crisis to the way a mob of members gave up their Saturday morning to clean up Miss Lois’ property and help her witness to her neighbors, to countless other examples of love like providing those in need with a place to stay, a job, a shoulder to cry on all night in the hospital.

(3) Fellowship in Truth: Love Leads to Holiness

Third, a Christian church is a fellowship in the truth. Unlike other communities, we are to be marked by an unusual personal transparency and bold honesty as we speak the truth of scripture to each other. And we do this out of a desire to see others grow in holiness. Jesus asked the Father in John 17:17, “Sanctify them [--that is, make them more holy and pure] in the truth; your word is truth.” Paul told the Colossians: “Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom.” (Col. 3:16).

Let’s think of two aspects of this fellowship in the truth. The first is transparency: telling the difficult truth about yourself. James 5:16, “Confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you may be healed.” This doesn’t mean you open up about your darkest struggles to all 950 members – but if we’re not opening up to 1 or 2 people, we should ask ourselves why. Are we afraid of being exposed? Of being rebuked? Of admitting we don’t have it all together? Consider that if we hide our sins and faults from those who love us, we’re robbing them of the opportunity to do spiritual good. Consider that if you model transparency, that will teach others what it looks like to humble yourself, and will lead to spiritual good for them.

The second aspect is proclamation: telling the truth about God and his Word at all times, even when it’s difficult for someone to hear. Paul says in Eph 4:15, “Speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the Head, into Christ.” This includes ordinary interactions at church. It includes discipling relationships where we meet up with someone of the same gender to read through a book or study scripture together for the express purpose of helping them grow spiritually.

This also involves exercising a spiritual watchfulness over each other. So, we read in Hebrews 3:13: “*But encourage one another daily, as long as it is called Today, so that none of you may be hardened by sin’s deceitfulness.”* Cultivate the ability to rebuke in love. Most of us naturally shy away from this because we want to avoid confrontation. (There might be a handful of folks who think they have the spiritual gift of rebuke and *enjoy* it - I’m not talking to you!) But it’s the loving thing to do. Sin aspires to deceive and our minds are prone to wander. We should especially watch out for those who seem to be wandering from the truth. Leviticus 19 (v.17) instructs: “Rebuke your neighbor frankly so you will not share in his guilt.” We read in James, “if one of you should wander from the truth and someone should bring him back, remember this: whoever turns a sinner from the error of his way will save him from death and cover over a multitude of sins.” (James 5:19).

Do you know friends who, at one time, seemed to be particularly active in the church and have drawn back, or maybe even have stopped attending church regularly? I’d encourage you to give them a call or have lunch with them to see how they are and what’s going on.

Of course, we’re not just to speak truth to each other when it’s an issue of sin. The whole book of Proverbs showcases the value of wise friends who can address the general habits and patterns in our lives. A genuine love for others will probe into these areas: would taking that job cause particular stress in your family; would taking that business trip put you in position of temptation; are your habits of spending time and money oriented fully toward what God values?

Praise God that this is a church where we speak truth to one another. I love hearing Michael Reeb cite scripture at Wednesday night Bible study. I love running into Alex Schuh at a coffee shop, seeing that she’s meeting with a woman from the church and her Bible’s open. I love how

Jean Durso regularly speaks words of encouragement and comfort when I talk with her before church.

(4) Fellowship in Forgiveness: Love Extends Mercy

Fourth, our fellowship isn’t only different because of our willingness to tell the truth, but also because of our willingness to forgive and reconcile when fellowship has been broken. Paul says in Colossians 3:13: “Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you.”

Christ’s forgiveness is the basis for ours. When someone sins against us, what’s our instinct? Either: withdraw in bitterness, I don’t want to have anything to do with them anymore; or, Get ‘em back - payback and revenge! But neither of these should take place in the church. God hasn’t withdrawn from that person, but has adopted them into his family. And Christ has already absorbed God’s just wrath for that person’s sin – no more “revenge” is necessary. The relational and judicial aspects, then, of God’s forgiveness make our forgiveness possible. As someone who has been forgiven much by God, how could we let sin that God has already dealt with stand between us and our brothers and sisters in Christ? Remember the parable of the unmerciful servant whose billion dollar debt was canceled but then got indignant when someone else couldn’t pay him five bucks. Forgiving from a posture of mercy, then, means refusing to let the sin stand in the way of loving relationship, and refusing to hold the sin against someone.

How can we cultivate this posture of mercy, knowing that people in the church will sin against us? For one, we should regard others as having good intentions and motives in their words and actions rather than jumping to conclusions in our minds, suspecting some evil intent. A good rule of thumb is to never assume someone’s motives. You know—or at least, you perceive—the facts. But we can’t always perceive motives. Humility provides the benefit of the doubt.

Then, consider that as Christians we belong to Christ in eternity with one another. We will one day dwell with one another in perfect fellowship - with no more sinning against each other. So when we look at each other in the church today, we should remind ourselves that we will be eternally united in Christ. You’re loving someone who’s on his or her way to perfect Christ-likeness when there will be nothing unlovely or abrasive about them. That should give us patience and perspective – this person won’t always be hard to love.

(5) Fellowship in Suffering: Love Brings Comfort

Fifth, Christian fellowship is unique because suffering doesn’t pull our community apart – it pulls us together. Paul says in 2 Cor 1 (vv. 4-5), [Christ] comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves have received from God. For just as the sufferings of Christ flow over into our lives, so also through Christ our comfort overflows.

This means that our relationships should be characterized by a warmth and gentleness that is a reflection of the compassion of our Savior. Jesus loved in this way, I love the account in Mark 1:40-41:

A man with leprosy came to him and begged him on his knees, “If you are willing, you can make me clean.” Filled with compassion, Jesus reached out his hand and touched the man. “I am willing,” he said. “Be clean!” Immediately the leprosy left him and he was cured.

Jesus didn’t have to touch the leper to heal him but he did to express compassion and to show that he can’t be made unclean, but he cleanses the dirty and downcast.

As the church, we’re the body of Christ. We experience what Jesus experiences. That means we will suffer and it means we will be filled with his comfort by his Spirit. Christians weren’t made to suffer alone. If you’re suffering, one of the ways God intends to bring you comfort is through the church. If you know someone who’s suffering, now is probably not the time for that word of rebuke - but for the Christlike touch of compassion. Now is the time the gentle word, the hug, prayer, simply sitting with someone and listening.

Offering comfort to someone who’s suffering isn’t really the type of thing you can check a box and sign up for. You have to be building relationships first – and then when trials come, be ready to make yourself available. When we gather on Sundays, I look around and I see many who are suffering – with pain and disease, with infertility, with heartbreak and grief, with despair, with financial crisis... but I also see many who make it their habit to offer comfort – through prayer, through their presence, through practical help, through simply singing a little bit louder so that songs of encouragement can surround those who feel too weak to sing.

(6) Fellowship as One Body: Love Considers the Whole

Finally, there’s a sixth aspect to notice. We’ve been talking about loving other individual members of our church. But scripture calls us to love and be committed to the whole congregation, not just a subset. 1 Cor 10 highlights the reality that taking the Lord’s Supper together as a church binds us together as one body. But how can we be faithful to love the whole congregation when it’s simply not feasible to know well all of the 900 plus members of this church? Four brief suggestions:

First, pray through the church directory - a page or two each day. That’s a great way you can love and serve the entire congregation. If you don’t know particular prayer needs of some members, then pray for them generally – use some of the prayers that we see Paul pray in the New Testament.

Second, we can love the whole congregation by building up a few people through discipling, teaching, etc. so that they in turn can then take what they’ve learned and minister to others in the congregation. So, make a key part of your discipling others teaching them how to disciple others. Another aspect of this is that when you serve in childcare, you love the whole congregation by allowing many parents to be discipled by the teaching of the Word. Thank you for doing that.

Third, one of the most practical loving things we can do is to give our offerings faithfully and generously for the good of the whole congregation.

And fourth, we can commit to attending members’ meetings. Don’t be fooled by all the handouts and budget charts – these meetings aren’t merely about business. This is where we show love to new members by affirming their profession of faith, and love to departing members by accepting their resignations. It’s where we oversee the mission and health of the church - that is to say, it’s where we show love for the whole church and care for how the body is doing.

QUESTIONS?

IV. Conclusion

As I was preparing this class, I noticed that the notes on this material had the names of many people who were great examples of love in this church. But the notes were from some years ago, and many of those people are now gone. God has moved them away or called them home. That was humbling to me. It reminded me that as long as God has us on this earth, we will keep loving each other until the final day. We at CHBC will pour ourselves out in love for more people every year even as every year some of our brothers and sisters say goodbye. That’s our joyous calling. And even at the final day, what will remain when this world with all its glitz and glamour passes away? Love. Paul says, prophecies will cease and tongues will be stilled and knowledge will pass away but love never fails (1 Cor 13:8). Jonathan Edwards said “Heaven is a world of love.” There, our love for one another will be perfect and complete because it will flow eternally from the one who is Love.