

CrossWay's Vision: Following Christ Through Fellowship
By Jason Huff
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1 Corinthians 14:26; Hebrews 10:24-25; Acts 2:40-47

Friends, our final Scripture reading is from Acts 2:40-47. May God add His blessing to the reading from His holy Word. “With many other words [Peter] warned them; and he pleaded with them, “Save yourselves from this corrupt generation.” Those who accepted his message were baptized, and about three thousand were added to their number that day. 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 favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.”

We like to be together. As a congregation, I have never worried about having a fellowship event where no one showed up. Other events – maybe! But not fellowship. One thing I know about CrossWay is that we enjoy each other's company. That is actually a far greater blessing than we might think.

When I was growing up, there was “fellowship time” in a little room between the second and third service. People did stand around and drink coffee and talk. I remember that room because it's where I became a life-long fan of donuts. (It was a special day when I was given two quarters to buy two donuts!) But for as huge a church as it was, fellowship wasn't a big deal. And when third service was over, zip...ten minutes after service and it was a ghost town. There were fellowship events here and there, but it wasn't a week-in, week-out thing for most people in that congregation. And this was a solid, Bible-following, loving, caring, nurturing congregation. Fellowship is harder to do than it looks because fellowship takes time.

As we've been going through our vision statement, we've come to the third point. “Our vision is to lead others toward a life-changing relationship with Jesus through service, invitation, fellowship, and the teaching of God's Word, encouraging them to faithfully follow as His disciples.” We lead others towards Jesus through fellowship. That might surprise us because fellowship often seems to be the thing we do that has the least to do with actually talking about God. We talk about the weather, the kids, activities, sports, all sorts of things except for faith. And I don't think any of that is wrong. But I do think that the biblical picture of fellowship gives us far more to talk about.

From literally the first days of the church, fellowship played a key role. Jesus establishes His church through His disciples that He personally chose. The twelve live together for three years under Jesus' authority. And these guys didn't naturally like each other. You have fishermen of little reputation. You have a tax collector, a traitorous stooge of Rome, especially to the zealot who promoted Jewish overthrow of the government. You have very young guys like John, and others who were considerably older. And Jesus throws them together.

Once the Holy Spirit comes, everything finally gels. Peter preaches about Jesus' resurrection and thousands come to faith. And what's amazing is the very first thing they commit to besides the teaching of the apostles is fellowship. It's that important. They met together in the temple courts to praise God and learn more. They ate together in their homes. Jews of all stripes, of all classes, of all backgrounds, start coming together in the name of Jesus. And later on, that fellowship includes Jews and Gentiles. People who would never even associate with each other, who might not handle each other's things for fear of contamination, are now eating together – the sign in that culture of real friendship.

It's the reason why so many of the letters that Paul writes have to do with issues of fellowship. Paul writes about theology and makes sure that believers are following the truth, but he constantly writes to keep each church in harmony with one another. When churches mess up their fellowship, Paul writes to them about it. He pleads with people who don't get along; he commands them not to show favoritism to those who are wealthy; he warns and encourages them about their treatment of one another.

When we look at the word “church” in the Bible, there's one term in Greek – *ekklesia*. It means “assembly” or “gathering.” Fellowship is built into the very nature of the word “church” – not a building, not a place, not even necessarily worship, though the church absolutely does worship God together in particular places. For a Christian church to exist, it needs only to be the gathering of individuals devoted to the living, resurrected Jesus.

When we met together in December at a restaurant, that was church. We don't stop being the church when worship ends and Meal and a Movie begins. The fellowship *is* the church. It's why in the most basic sense, watching a worship service on TV or listening to someone teach on the radio can be wonderful, even bring you to know Jesus and believe in Him, but it can't make you a part of the church. It's not part of the definition of the word.

So let's look deeper at fellowship. In the rest of our time together, I want to examine a few biblical thoughts about the fellowship of believers. We've looked at the history of Christian fellowship, but we also need to figure out why it's important and how to keep it central.

So let's start with the why. Why should we fellowship? There are many people who say they believe in God who never join a fellowship at all. There are others that worship God, perhaps as a part of a congregation, they come to service, but they don't participate in the fellowship of the congregation. Why is this a problem?

It's a problem because fellowship grows our faith in God, our knowledge of others and their needs, and our attitude of praise. Acts 2 shows us how the fellowship of the believers helped them grow more and more confident. Hebrews 10 reminds us that encouragement and spurring one another one is part of fellowship. The faith of the early church grew because other people came alongside them.

This past week, I was in Indianapolis with my mom – I left early Tuesday afternoon and got back late Friday afternoon. And while she's doing well, it was a discouraging situation in many respects. There's a lot to be done in the coming weeks and months – she's got a lot of rehab to do, and we've got a lot of work to get her condo livable on just one floor. With our move of worship to Sundays and our goal of inviting more people to join us in the next few months, it hit me pretty hard. “God, why did you choose to allow this right now?”

But the faith-building parts came through the fellowship of other believers. It was great when I got to be there when one of Mom's pastors showed up. It was encouraging to meet with the head of Steven Ministries, a specialized outreach to people going through hard times. Though there were only a few of us in Mom's room at a time, that fellowship meant a lot. And while you all couldn't be there, your notes and texts and posts were really appreciated.

Does that redefine fellowship if people are far away? We live in an era where communication over great distances is far easier than it used to be. We need to be fellowshipping with the people that we know, that we love and support and who love and support us. That's why my mom is staying just a couple miles from her home, because she has that fellowship there. But when we meet together in the name of Christ, even if by Skype or FaceTime or whatnot, we are bringing the fellowship to others. When there is no choice due to illness or injury, God still makes a way for us to be a part of His community of believers.

And fellowship is not defined by how many people are there. Jesus said, “Where two or three are gathered together in my name, I am there in their midst.” Fellowship is not limited to official get-togethers the church organizes. When you have another Christian family in your home for dinner, when you meet other believers with your children or grandchildren for a playdate, whether they're a part of CrossWay or not, if you meet in Jesus' name – if you talk about what God is doing in your lives, learning how God can use you in their lives, if you give Him any sort of praise – that's fellowship too. Fellowship is living life together, as a family of believers.

In Acts 2, we see the early church members selling off property and giving to anyone who had need. That's just amazing. What would spur them on to that level of devotion and care and self-sacrifice? Of course, it was the Holy Spirit working in them to guide and direct them. Without Him, they would have still been their old selfish selves. But they also could sell their property and give freely – and joyfully, it says! Imagine giving so much away joyfully – they could do all of that because they knew one another.

Because they were together, because they lived in community – not in the same homes, but they lived as if what one had was for the good of all – they were far more aware of what real needs were. So often we don't share our burdens with others and we say, “I just don't want them to have to handle that.” But when we know each other deeply, it becomes a privilege to help someone we love. When Mom and I met Pam, the leader of the Steven Ministry I mentioned earlier, she said she had been “blessed a million times over” by being able to help others in their times of need.

When we don't know one another, we aren't likely to give. We assume the worst, that someone is trying to take advantage of us. But when we do know one another, those walls come down. We sometimes learn that the people we distrusted at first are actually those God will make into reliable, faithful friends. When we live in Christian community, we find that the person whose burden we bear one year winds up carrying our burden years down the road. God is good that way, to give us friends that can share the load of this world. Jesus gave us one another as brothers and sisters in faith. And that is why, as Hebrews 10 says, "Let us not give up meeting together."

Now I want to shift for a minute to the "how." Now I don't mean that we need instructions on how to plan a fellowship event – we get that pretty well. But I want you to think with me a little bit deeper about what Paul says about Christian fellowship in 1 Corinthians 14 and how it looks different from our fellowship.

Let's hear it again, as it's short: "What then shall we say, brothers? When you come together, everyone has a hymn, or a word of instruction, a revelation, a tongue or an interpretation. All of these must be done for the strengthening of the church." Paul isn't writing to the pastor of the church in Corinth, or even the elders. He's writing to everyone.

Dream with me for a minute – what would it be if we were to take responsibility for the spiritual growth of others in our midst? We don't always do a very good job of taking responsibility for our *own* spiritual growth! We can put off prayer or reading Scripture, spending time with God, because hey, it will be there tomorrow, and I've got to work today, I've got to make dinner today, I've got to get the kids to school/practice/a game, I've got doctors' appointments and this and that. We often put off what's best for us because time wears us down. But what if we had responsibility for the spiritual welfare of others? Would that change the ballgame?

Maybe, maybe not. It doesn't always inspire me to read my Bible just because I'll be preaching and leading worship. I don't always pray as I should because of the deadlines ahead or the pressures of the week. But there is something to responsibility and our own growth. Most of us mature as we marry and have children – not because marriage and children make us grow up, but because those responsibilities require us to be more dependable. When others count on us, yes, sometimes we fail, but often we rise to the challenge.

What would it be if each of us did as Paul asked the congregation in Corinth to do? What if each of us had something to share in our fellowship time? That doesn't mean we won't talk about the events of the week or someone's upcoming trip or chit chat. But what might it mean if you also could share something that touched you spiritually during the week – a song that God brought to your mind or a Bible verse, an encouragement God gave you or an insight into a struggle? Not as a requirement, not a checklist item, you know, "did you have your spiritual insight ready for fellowship," kind of thing, but something where on a regular basis, we had spiritual conversation even in our fellowship?

Because what we do in this room is just practice for what goes on out in the world. When we worship here, we're directly giving praise and glory to God, we're confessing our sin, we're reminded of God's forgiveness, we hear His word to us, we give. But it's rehearsal for the whole of our lives. It's rehearsal for honoring God when things don't go well at work and someone needs some encouragement, for confessing when we haven't done our best or gotten angry with someone at home, for listening to God's voice when the distractions of the world are screaming at you – or as we had this week, with the hospital machines beeping at you all the time.

And fellowship is just as much a rehearsal of that as worship. And it's in fellowship that people see who we really are. Because let's face it – almost every modern church has a worship service, and some of them are very technically impressive. Not every church wants to talk about Jesus and present Him as our only hope, our Savior and Lord, but a good number still do. But fellowship is where people see the love of God lived out.

Because not every church is a fellowship. Not every church shows love and kindness to strangers. Not every church invites people in. Not every church sits down with others and encourages them to share what God has been doing, listening to the blessings and the hurts alike. We've got the basics of fellowship down. We like to be together and we care about one another. We have shown love to those who have come in our doors. I simply encourage us to do it in ways that make it unquestionable that we do it out of our love for Jesus Christ, that He is the center of everything we do. The earliest converts to the church were the people who saw the love of God's people for one another, the love that very dissimilar people from different backgrounds and cultures and races showed to one another, and they knew that God was working. We can do that. We must do that.

Friends, God is good. He has given us the grace of fellowship, and we have lived it out as a congregation so far. I believe as we let more people know that CrossWay is here in the community for them, we will have a great opportunity to grow in showing love to each other and to new folks in fellowship. Let us be ready to share life with them, to share Christ with them, to share with them the good news that Jesus Christ lived, died, and rose again so that they might know the living God and be known by Him as His precious daughter or son.