



Cultivating Community

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- We talked about Feeding the Faith of our Young People and our Ecclesial Members...
- This is done through a daily diet of:
- Active and Alive Prayers
- Applicable and Helpful Bible Readings
- Healthy and Real Fellowship
- It's kind of frustrating, because even if you lead a horse to water, *he won't buy you a drink...* Or, something like that...
- It's frustrating because we can't really **FEED** the **FAITH** of others
- We **CAN** provide a good example, and with the grace of God, that will help
- It's very important that we provide an environment that is real and positive
- We need to provide a healthy environment for Faith to grow
- I feel that Fellowship in a healthy Ecclesia is one of the best way to Feed your Faith
- Christian Faith is founded in Community
- The Ecclesia is the **"Body of Christ"**
- As a Community of Believers it is **"Our Faith"** that needs feeding if we are to be any use as Christians
- If you are concerned about the **"Young People"** and the challenges that face their Faith, the best thing that you can do is make sure that they are members of a Community of Faithful people

- It is in **Community** that Faith is Fed

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- It is only in a **COMMUNITY** that we live and thrive as Christians
- It's important that we all come to understand and fully grasp the idea that when we become members of the Body of Christ...
- You are not simply asked to **BELIEVE**
- You are called to **BELONG**
- While your relationship with God is **PERSONAL**, it is not intended to be **PRIVATE**
- While fundamentally religion is between you and God, he does not intend for you to go about this alone

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- Romans 12:4-5 NIV

- 4) Just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function,
- 5) so in Christ we who are many form one body, and

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each member belongs to all the others.

- Following Christ means **BELONGING**, not just **BELIEVING**
- Body parts on their own are useless...
- For us to begin to find our purpose, or fulfill what God has planned for us, we have to be part of a Body
- We can't expect that we are going to survive on our own...
- Listen to these same verses in another translation:

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- Romans 12:4-5 Message

4) In this way we are like the various parts of a human body. Each part gets its meaning from the body as a whole, not the other way around.

5) The body we're talking about is Christ's body of chosen people. Each of us finds our meaning and function as a part of his body. But as a chopped-off finger or cut-off toe we wouldn't amount to much, would we?

- If an organ is severed from its body, it will shrivel up and die
- It cannot exist on its own, and neither can you
- Spiritually disconnected from the lifeblood of your body, your spiritual life will wither and eventually cease to exist
- That is why the first symptom of spiritual decline is usually inconsistent attendance at Memorial Service and other gatherings of the body
- When you become careless of fellowship, other things begin to slide also
- But, you can become spiritually disconnected even while sitting in Memorial Service
- ***If you think that simply sitting in church will turn you into a Christian...***
- ***Then you must think that sitting in your garage will turn you into a car!***
- Membership in the Family of God is neither inconsequential nor something to be casually ignored
- You must be there in order to participate in it
- And when you are there, you have to actually be there
- You need full and connected participation with your Ecclesia

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- ***Life was meant to be shared***
- God intends for you to experience life together
- Experiencing life together is called Fellowship

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- The meaning of the word "Fellowship" has fallen into meaning casual conversation, socializing, or worse yet, doctrinal alliances

- To say, “**Which Fellowship is he in?**”...
- Is often mistakenly interpreted to mean “Does he believe that God has revealed whether or not He will raise the unbaptized?”
- To say, “**Stay after class for Fellowship**”...
- is often mistakenly interpreted to mean “There will be refreshments after the class.”

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- Real Fellowship is much more than allegiance to a Statement of Faith

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- Real Fellowship is much more than sharing Coffee and Cookies

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- Real Fellowship is experiencing life together...
- Honest sharing
- Practical serving
- Sacrificial giving
- Sympathetic comforting
- When it comes to Fellowship, “***Smaller is better***”
- The average person can only maintain close relationships with 6-8 people
- Once a group gets larger than 10 people, someone stops participating
- Jesus was extremely skilled at relating to people, and he limited his group to 12 people
- ***You can worship God in a large group, but you can’t fellowship with one***
- Every Ecclesia should actively pursue Small Groups in order to sweeten the Fellowship that the members share
- Consider Home Fellowship Groups
- Break out into smaller group for Sunday School on Sunday Morning – Sister’s Classes, Brother’s Classes, etc.,

- Set up Small Group Bible Studies
- Create opportunities for people to spend time in a Group that is small enough for them to be a “**part**” of it
- We get stuck in superficiality, and it’s easier to stay there with the anonymity of a large group
- When you break into smaller groups, then you can be more free to share things in an intimate and real way
- Many people have never experienced real fellowship, and don’t know how
- What is the difference between real fellowship and fake fellowship?

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- Here are **4** differences:

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1 - In Real Fellowship people experience AUTHENTICITY

- Authentic fellowship is not superficial, surface-level chit chat
- It is genuine, heart-to-heart, sometimes gut-level sharing
- ***Authentic fellowship happens when people are honest about who they are and what is happening in their lives***
- They share their hurts, reveal their feelings, confess their failures, disclose their doubts, admit their fears, acknowledge their weaknesses and ask for help and prayer
- This is the kind of Fellowship that is talked about in John’s Letters

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- 1st John 1:7-8 NIV

7) But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin.

8) If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us.

- Notice the connection between having Fellowship and claiming we are without sin?

- The two are opposed
- If you want true Fellowship you have to open and honest about who you are
- ***Authentic fellowship is the exact opposite of what you often find in our Ecclesias***
- Often in your Ecclesia you find:
 - Pretending, role-playing, politicking and superficial politeness
 - People often wear masks, keep their guards up, and act as if everything is rosy in their lives
 - The shame about this is not only are they themselves missing out on the beautiful glory of what God has planned for you, but they often endanger others
 - I have heard too often someone (usually a young person) complaining about the hypocrisy in their meeting
 - Once the truth leaks out, and you are truly seen for who you are, it can crush people who grew up their whole lives believing the pretense that you projected for so many years
- Nothing will destroy faith and drive away members faster than Fake Fellowship
- It's only when you become open and honest about your life that you experience Real Fellowship
- Of course, being authentic requires courage and humility
- It means facing your fears of exposure, rejection and being hurt again
- Why would anyone take such a risk?
- Because it is the only way to grow spiritually and become emotionally healthy
- Because it is what God has planned and wants for us
- Because it is healthy and good
- And, because it is effective

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- James 5:16 NIV

16) 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.

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2 - In Real Fellowship people experience MUTUALITY

- Mutuality is the art of giving and receiving
 - Mutuality is learning to depend on each other

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- 1st Corinthians 12:25-26 NIV

25) So that there should be no division in the body, but that its parts should have equal concern for each other.

26) If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it.

- Mutuality is when the members of your Ecclesia have equal concern for each other
- ***Mutuality is the heart of fellowship***
- Building reciprocal relationships, sharing responsibilities and helping each other
- Encouraging one another
- Not a one-way street
- Not a Speaker and an Audience
- Look how Paul described it in Romans...

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- Romans 1:11-12 NIV

11) I long to see you so that I may impart to you some spiritual gift to make you strong—

12) that is, that **you and I may be mutually encouraged** by each other's faith.

- Paul was looking for encouragement from them, as much as they were looking to him for encouragement

- He continues on that theme in Chapter 12

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- Romans 12:10 NIV

10) Be devoted to one another in brotherly love. Honor one another above yourselves.

- We need to look out for the Members of our Ecclesia
- ***You are not responsible for everyone in the Body of Christ***
- ***But you are responsible to them, and God expects you to do whatever you can to help them***

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3 - In Real Fellowship people experience **SYMPATHY**

- Sympathy in the Bible isn't feeling sorry for someone
- Sympathy isn't giving advice, or offering quick, cosmetic help
- Sympathy is entering in and sharing the pain of others
- ***Sympathy meets two fundamental human needs:***
- ***The need to be understood***
- ***The need to have your feelings validated***
- Every time you take the time to understand and affirm someone's feelings, you build fellowship with them
- ***The problem is that we are too often in a hurry to try to fix things, that we don't take time to sympathize with them***
- We get too wrapped up in our own issues, and don't have any time for sympathy for others

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- Galatians 6:2 NIV

2) Carry each other's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ.

- There are different levels of Fellowship...

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- The Fellowship of Sharing Together is pretty common, as we share a meal together, or share an experience
- The Fellowship of Studying Together is a higher level of Fellowship and still pretty common in our Community
- The Fellowship of Serving Together is an even higher level of Fellowship, and those who have served on Committees together, worked on Ecclesial Projects, or spent time preaching with someone else knows the level of Fellowship you share when you are serving together
- The deepest most intense level of Fellowship is the Fellowship of Suffering together, where we enter into another person's pain and grief and carry each other's burden
- Brothers and Sisters who have experienced this level of Fellowship have experienced a wonderful and real level of Fellowship
- It is in times of deep crisis, grief, and doubt that we need someone there for us to help carry our burden

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4 - In Real Fellowship people experience **MERCY**

• ***Fellowship is a place of grace, where mistakes aren't RUBBEN IN, but RUBBED OUT***

• ***Fellowship happens when mercy wins over justice***

- The example of the Brother in Corinth is an interesting one:

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• 2nd Corinthians 2:7-8 NIV

7) Now instead, you ought to forgive and comfort him, so that he will not be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow.

8) I urge you, therefore, to **reaffirm your love for him.**

- We **ALL** need mercy, because we stumble and fall
- You can't have fellowship without forgiveness

- Bitterness and resentment always destroy fellowship
- Because you are an imperfect, sinful person you will inevitably hurt other people when you are together with them for a long time
- People will inevitably hurt you also:
- Sometimes unintentionally, sometimes intentionally...
- Either way it takes mercy and grace to maintain fellowship

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- Colossians 3:12-13 NIV

12) Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience.

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13) **Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another.** Forgive as the Lord forgave you.

- We must learn to be quick with Mercy, even as God is
- *Many people are reluctant to show mercy because they don't understand the difference between forgiveness and trust*
- *Forgiveness is letting go of the past*
- *Trust is about how you deal with the future*
- You must forgive someone immediately
- Trust has to be built up over time
- You are commanded by God to forgive people
- But you aren't expected to trust them immediately, or allow them to continue to hurt you
- But, you do have to forgive them immediately
- Whenever you are hurt by someone, you have a choice to make:
- Are you going to use your energy for **RETALIATION** or for **RESOLUTION**?

- Focus on resolving your relationship
- Focus on how much God has forgiven you, and it might be easier for you to see your way through forgiving them
- ***Fellowship with a group of believers is essential to your spiritual growth***
- If you want to grow as a Believer, you must be part of Real Fellowship
- So, how do we do it?
- What does it take to develop this kind of Fellowship?
- ***Fellowship requires commitment***
- If you are tired of Fake Fellowship
- If you want to Cultivate Real Fellowship
- You will need to commit yourself to 5 things:

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1 - Cultivating Fellowship takes **HONESTY**

- You have to care enough to lovingly speak the truth, instead of glossing over a problem or ignoring an issue
- Many fellowships remain superficial because they are afraid of conflict
- Issues never get resolved and everyone lives with underlying frustration
- Everyone knows about the problem (the 800 pound gorilla in the room), but no one dares talk openly about it
- Many people in our Ecclesia KNEW that the Brother had a serious problem with Depression and Alcoholism, but no one dared talk to him about it
- When he was found dead in his home, we **ALL** wished we had...
- While it is much easier to remain silent around others with a sinful pattern in their lives, it is not the loving thing to do
- People often have no one in their lives who love them enough to tell them the truth, so they continue in destructive way

- Often we **KNOW** what needs to be said to someone, but our fear prevents us from saying it

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- Galatians 6:1 NIV

1) Brothers, if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently. But watch yourself, or you also may be tempted.

- ***In the end, people appreciate frankness more than flattery***

- But, frankness is not rudeness
- Don't be rude... Be loving, but be honest

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- Ephesians 4:25 NIV

25) Therefore each of you must put off falsehood and speak truthfully to his neighbor, **for we are all members of one body.**

- Too many Fellowships remain superficial because people are afraid of Conflict
- Whenever something comes up that might cause discomfort, it is glossed over in order to "keep the peace"
- That kind of "peace" is like a Petri Dish where secrets and gossip thrive
- That kind of "peace" will destroy your Fellowship
- Don't be afraid to get it out in the open and talk honestly about it
- But, do it in a loving way...

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2 - Cultivating Fellowship takes HUMILITY

- Self-importance, stubborn pride and smugness destroys fellowship
- ***Pride builds walls between people...***
- ***Humility builds bridges***

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- Romans 12:16 NIV

16) Live in harmony with one another. Do not be proud, but be willing to associate with people of low position. Do not be conceited.

- Humility is the grease that smoothes the gears of our Relationships
- The best way to keep your Fellowship running smoothly is to approach it with a humble attitude
- That's why Peter tells us to "clothe ourselves with humility"

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- 1st Peter 5:5 NIV

5) Young men, in the same way be submissive to those who are older. All of you, clothe yourselves with humility toward one another, because, **"God opposes the proud"**

- Notice how it says that "God opposes the proud?"
- This is another good reason to be Humble: Pride blocks God's grace in our lives
- We receive God's grace when we are humble enough to admit that we need it
- You can develop your Humility by admitting your weaknesses, by being patient with other people's weaknesses, by being open to correction, and by focusing on others instead of yourself

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- Philippians 2:3-4 NIV

3) Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves.

4) Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others.

- ***Humility is not thinking less of yourself, humility is thinking of yourself less***

- Humility is thinking more of others
- Humble people are so focused on serving others, that they don't think of themselves

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3 - Cultivating Fellowship takes COURTESY

- Courtesy is respecting other people's differences, being considerate of their feelings, and being patient when they irritate you
- *Every group has at least one "difficult" person*
- *They are an opportunity for growth and a test of fellowship*
- You also have quirks and annoying traits
- *Real fellowship has nothing to do with compatibility*
- *The basis for your fellowship is your relationship to God*
- *You are part of a family*
- *In a family you are accepted simply because you are a member of the family*
- One key to courtesy is to understand where people are coming from
- Get to know their history
- Don't concentrate on how far they still have to go
- Look at how far they have come in spite of their problems
- We are commanded to love one another...
- You may not like them, but you have to be courteous to them...

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4 - Cultivating Fellowship takes CONFIDENTIALITY

- Only in a safe environment will people open up and share their deepest hurts, needs, and mistakes
- Confidentiality does not mean keeping silent while your Brother or Sister sins
- It means what is shared with your group needs to stay in the group
- The group needs to deal with it and not gossip about it

- ***God hates gossip***
- ***Gossip causes hurt and divisions***
- ***Gossip destroys fellowship***
- Gossip will shut people down, it will close off the openness and sharing that you have worked hard to develop

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- Proverbs 16:28 NIV

3) A perverse man stirs up dissension, and **a gossip separates close friends.**

- You are commanded to confront those who cause division and gossip and not to allow it to continue

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5 - Cultivating Fellowship takes **FREQUENCY**

- You **MUST** have frequent, regular contact with your group in order to build fellowship
- Relationships take time
- Develop the **HABIT** of meeting together
- ***Fellowship is built not on convenience, but on conviction***
- ***You don't get together when you feel like it, but because you need it***
- Because life is all about learning to love, God wants you to value relationships

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- We've created quite a list – These things ask quite a bit from you
 - Speaking the truth in love
 - Admitting our weaknesses
 - Respecting each other's differences
 - Not gossiping about each other
 - Making it a priority to spend time together
 - Sharing your true feelings
 - Encouraging one another

- Supporting each other
 - Forgiving each other
- When you look at the list, it's obvious why Genuine Fellowship is so rare...
 - But, the **BENEFITS** of sharing life together far outweighs the **COST**
 - Both for **US**, and for the **MEMBERS** of our Ecclesias!
 - Next period we'll brainstorm some solutions to the real problems that face our Ecclesias