

What you need to know about church fellowship PART 2



(Act 2:42-46)

Though verse 42 reveals more than “fellowship” as that which the early church committed themselves to, this particular discipline is clearly the authors’ emphasis given its focus in the remaining verses (vv43-46). As such, it behooves every church (and Christian) to know what God is telling us about it. What (then) these verses teach us about this important discipline:

1. We must be committed to fellowship...

(42) “devoted” [προσκαρτεροῦντες] = a constant and frequent loyalty or commitment (Act 1:14, 6:4, 10:7; Col 4:2).

The restriction/constriction placed on our freedoms/free-time b/c of our commitment to frequent fellowship should not surprise us since this is how Jesus describes the Christian life (Mat 7:13-14) “hard” [θλίβω] = restrictive/constrictive; to crowd against (Mar 3:9).

“The family of God is where I lose my life in order to gain it.” – Joseph Hellerman (*When The Church Was A Family*)

2. We must be committed to fellowship *with our church family*...

(42-44) “were together” = The members of the early church were not committed to fellowship w/unbelievers but Christians – or more specifically, the other members of their (particular) church.

“The [covenant] community must take precedence...for we are born for fellowship, and he who sets its claims above his private interests is specially acceptable to God.” – Josephus (*Contra Apion*, 2.197)

In establishing this truth, 3 implications follow:

2.1. It w/b the members of the church whom I will seek for wisdom and choose to have the greatest influence over my thinking, decisions and life (Act 4:32 – “one heart and soul”; Rom 12:1-2; Phi 1:27, 2:1-4; 1Co 1:10).

“In a church imitating those found in biblical times the person perceives himself or herself to be a member of a group and responsible to the group for his or her actions, destiny, career, development, and life in general. The individual person is embedded in the group and is free to do what he or she feels right and necessary only if in accord with group norms and only if the action is in the group’s best interest. The group has priority over the individual member, and it may use...the members of the group itself to facilitate group oriented goals and objectives.” – B. Malina (*Christian Origins And Anthropology*)

2.2. It w/b the members of the church whom I will seek to know best and will choose to open up to in relation to my own life (2Co 5:11-7:1...2 – “Make room for us”).

This is where the Corinthian church members struggled and may have caused many of them to forfeit heaven since God views those we are closest to (relationally thru getting to know them and them us) as a sign of our holiness and relationship w/Him (2Co 5:11-7:1 = commitment/closeness to our church family is how we live for Christ, complete holiness and remain the people of God).

2.3. It w/b the members of the church to whom I choose to give my greatest loyalty (Mar 3:31-35)

“The blood of the covenant is thicker than the water of the womb”

“The loyalty conflict [in Scripture] is not about making a choice between God and people. Rather, it is about choosing between one group of people and another – between our natural family and our eternal family.” – Joseph Hellerman

3. We must be committed to fellowship *with our church family that includes getting together weekly with limited and varying members in the personal setting of our/their individual homes*...

3.1. Whereas “the apostles’ teaching...the breaking of bread and prayers” (v42) refer to those commitments carried out in the context of the Lord’s Day/Sunday assembly (i.e. learning through preaching/teaching, cleansing through the Lord’s Supper/Table [e.g. 20:7; 1Co 11:20] and supplication through corporate prayers), the commitment to “fellowship” (v42) involves a different scope and setting. It was to take place w/limited and varying members in the personal setting of their individual homes (v46 – “breaking bread in their homes”).

3.2. When we consider the frequency of the other disciplines/obligations (as discussed, they occur weekly on Sundays or the Lord’s Day), the exact frequency w/which we are to be getting together (in these limited and special formats as an aspect of fellowship) immediately emerges. IOW: Our fellowship sb weekly.

Establishing such as the expected goal for members in the church is justified based on the fact that God's requires His leaders to establish a clearly defined/specific metric (or standard) for His people in relation to all of His precepts/principles that is objective (based on the biblical evidence/instruction available and respectably relevant to the culture and time of the church's existence – 1Co 7:25-26; Act 15:19-21; Deu 17:6-13 w/19:15 w/Mat 18:15-20 w/1Ti 5:19-21) and equitable (achieving/requiring the same for all – Num 15:16) versus subjective (based on preference) – including (especially in re: to) those precepts/principles which are deliberately more general (or less specific) in their communication (e.g. Exo 22:1; Heb 10:24-26). In this respect, the existing evidence points in the direction of weekly fellowship given this discipline's close and integrated grammatical grouping w/the other disciplines and equal association with the unique form of devotion communicated in the text; one whose frequency of commitment we know to be weekly (42). Anything (therefore) other than this position would be presumption (even sin) since we would be acting on what we don't know (i.e. w/o prescribed/proper evidence – Deu 17:6-13 w/19:15 w/Mat 18:15-20 w/1Ti 5:19-21).

4. We must be committed to fellowship with our church family that includes getting together weekly with limited and varying members in the personal setting of our/their individual homes for the purpose of sharing our resources, God's Word and how God has worked or has been working in our lives.

4.1. As it re: to sharing resources: (43-45) = Rarely (if ever) does the term "fellowship" occur in Scripture w/o evidence of members in covenant community sharing their resources w/other members – most especially those in need. This includes the examples found in verses (43-45) as well as their repeat in (4:32). Indeed so strong is the connection between fellowship and charitable giving, that the word for fellowship (κοινωνία) is at times translated to reflect it (Rom 15:26; 2Co 9:13; Phi 2:1). It is in this sense that the phrase "had all things in common" is to be understood. IOW: what one member possessed as surplus was viewed as available for use in shoring up the needs in the congregation. This included the liquidation of one's larger assets or investments (see Act 4:34-37) or the use of one's gifts/abilities (v43 w/3:6-7; see also 4:33; this is the kind of fellowship prescribed in 1Pe 4:9-10; see also Rom 12:13 w/6-8).

4.2. As it re: to sharing God's Word and how God has worked/has been working in our lives: (46-47a) "breaking bread in their homes, they received their food..." = In ancient times (including the first century), meals shared w/those outside your biological family signaled that the purpose was *not* (simply) physical nourishment. Food (in such scenarios) was eaten by guests as they reclined on couches and participated in learning or discussing aspects of social life from their theological viewpoint (Mat 9:10, 26:7, 20; Mar 2:15; Luk 7:36, 11:37, 14:15, 22:14)¹. In the case of Christians, that (of course) would mean discussions on various life issues and relating it to the teaching of the Bible. By mentioning that the early church members received such food "with glad and generous hearts praising God" adds further insight as to what else accompanied these biblical conversations. It included also the sharing of how God had been working or was current working in their lives – as this would be the basis of their praise, gladness and expressions of generosity – God's goodness to them in everyday life (e.g. Psa 145). The sharing of a meal/food was not then the key to accomplishing fellowship. It merely served as a vehicle to what was - the sharing of God's Word and works among them (e.g. Luk 14:1-24; Ancient works associated w/such fellowship included the books, *Table Talk* by Plutarch and *Learned Banquet* by Athenaeus).

CLOSING CONTEMPLATION:

*Does food always need to accompany such fellowship times? As already stated, food was not the necessary component to accomplishing fellowship. It again only served as a vehicle to what was- God-centered sharing and conversation. Therefore any personal gathering – including those without food, where God-centered conversation/sharing takes place, should be viewed as the fulfillment of this weekly commitment.

** When there is food, does that food need to include "bread"? As w/the previous question, food is not the focus or issue. That being said, bread should never be prohibited, condemned or any way treated as a bad thing - as can be the case among the "keto-Nazis" of our day. The Bible views bread (i.e. carbohydrates) as a blessing from God (Gen 28:20; Exo 16:5, 32, 23:15; Psa 78, 132:15; Ecc 10:19; Neh 9:15, as holy (Lev 21:6-22; Joh 6:35-58), something we are to pray for (Mat 6:11); as good for nourishment or energy (Psa 104:15) and never the cause of disease or death (e.g. cancer). Only sin can cause disease and death (not bread/carbohydrates). Interestingly enough, the only account of God killing people in relation to food was when they despised His provision of bread and instead craved meat (Num 11:1-35). Lastly in relation to bread, it sb mentioned that God warns us to never treat as "evil" (or unhealthy) what He calls "good" (Isa 5:20).

*** Does such fellowship need to take place in our homes? Once more, it is the action of sharing God's Word and work in our lives w/each other that constitutes our time as fellowship – not food or our homes. Nevertheless, our homes play a vital role in others getting to know and love us more – something God also desires (1Th 4:9-10). Additionally, it can serve as a kind of "visual witness" to our submission to Christ in the areas of holiness, beauty and order (Deu 7:26).

**** What does this study tell us about the modern Christian view that the dining room table is the "proper place" to consume a meal? Such thinking is ill-informed and not supported by the Bible. Jesus preferred the couch ☺.

¹ "The general custom of the ancient world [was] there were three couches (hence the name for the dining room, triclinium). Food was served from a table in the middle of the room and one ate reclining. These [meals] were made the...setting for antiquarian learning [or] spent in...conversation [on] social [issues]" – Everett Ferguson (*Backgrounds of Early Christianity*)