



Shaping the Heart

Spiritual Formation & the Christian Life

How Might We Think about Fellowship?

The term “fellowship” is often just another term for “socializing,” typically involving a meal, fun activity, or a casual acquaintance with others by way of a common religious affiliation. For disciples of Jesus, however, fellowship involves a deeper level of community than mere socializing offers. While fellowship is inherently social, it involves sharing our new life in Christ with others. Most fundamentally, fellowship is the outcome of belief in and love for Jesus (1 Jn 1:3).

*From the very beginning God pronounces and it remains forever true that “it is not good for man to be alone” (Gen 2:18). We need one another and truly we are better together. This is the working assumption in all fellowship. Therefore, I would offer that **fellowship is a devoted alliance between individuals with a mutual spiritual heritage and who actively participate in one another’s spiritual formation.***

1. Because we share the same divine life, have the same spiritual DNA, and consequently belong to the same spiritual family, **the goal of fellowship is to encourage one another toward being like our spiritual Parentage** (Lev 19:2; Mt 5:48; Eph 4:15-16; 5:1; 1 Pt 1:16). Put differently, no believer grows alone because we are all connected! As each family member actively participates in the growth of other family members, primarily through serving from one’s spiritual giftedness (1 Cor. 12:7-11), the entire organism gets stronger.
2. *Although we must avoid a “cultural Christianity,” (embracing the values of Christianity but not being a Christ-follower), **fellowship provides the opportunity to imitate others as they imitate Christ.*** Negatively, Scripture warns of assimilating into the wrong crowd (Ps 1; Deut 18:9). Positively, we are encouraged to follow the example of others who follow Christ and to hold in high esteem all who model service and holy living (1 Cor 4:16-17; 11:1; Philip 2:19-30; 3:17; 2 Thess 3:7-10; 1 Tim 4:15).
3. **Fellowship is preventative, keeping us from spiritual malnutrition.** Read Heb 10:24-25. This text is a strong warning to those who think they can live their spiritual lives apart from biblical community. In essence, fellowship is God’s gracious resource for preserving our spiritual lives. [Note: The text warns against *habitual* neglect of biblical community (“as is the habit of some”), not an occasional respite due to burn-out or church abuse.] Fellowship is God’s spiritual lifejacket to weather the storms of life. When tempted to abandon our confession of faith because of torrential storms, biblical community is God’s way of reeling us back in to shallow and safe waters (Jude 23).
4. **Fellowship promotes honesty and transparency, keeping us from the deceitfulness of sin.** Heb 3:13 calls on us to “exhort one another every day, as long as it is called ‘today,’ that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin.” When we’re living in isolation and apart from biblical community, it’s easier to concoct our own definition of what is sinful and what is not and be carried away by the deceitfulness of sin. Fellowship offers a restraining influence so we avoid distorted views and twisted interpretations used to justify sinful attitudes and activities (see Pr 15:22; Ps 1). We are **better together!**



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How Might We Think about Worship & the Liturgy?

Whereas worship involves hungering and thirsting for what we most desire (Ps 42:1-2; Mt 5:6), liturgy involves recalibrating or re-habituating our longings and reordering our desires. Put simply, worship is embodied rehearsal of our affections that engages our whole being (Rom 12:1-2). **Worship, therefore, is an embodied response to what God has done in us.** Recall from Lesson 1 I said...

“Spiritual formation emerges from the heart, that immaterial space, but it manifests in and expresses itself through the body; our physical presence in the world (cf., Rom. 12:1; 1 Cor. 6:19-20; 2 Cor. 5:10; Philip. 1:20). “Our body is both the place of our personal presence and the temple of the living God—it is the place we meet with him and he lives in and through us” (*Earthen Vessels*, p 182). Christ takes up residence *in* us (Gal. 2:20; see also 2 Cor. 4:10). Therefore, the habits and patterns of our bodies matter.”

Whether free and spontaneous or calculated and habituated, worship involves our whole being.

1. **Worship does not begin in us but does come from us and through us.** Behind and before every act of worship is a deep and profound reaction to God’s love in us and for us. “We love **because** he first loved us” (1 Jn 4:19). It is “**because** God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit” that we cast all our attention and affections on the Guest of honor in our hearts (Rom 5:5; see also Ps 95:6-7; Mt 4:10; Rev 4:8-11; 5:11-14). **Similarly, though worship involves us, it is not about us.** It’s important not to conflate the sincerity of our worship with the God of our worship. God, not our subjective experience, is the subject and the object of worship. It is God who initiates and it is God who inspires true worship. We willingly and gladly receive his movement by actively responding in praise and adoration.
2. **Worship may include liturgy but is more than routine, repetitive activities.** While traditional patterns of worship are not wrong *per se*, if mercy, justice, righteousness, and sacrifice are concealed by our religious practices, or are altogether absent from them, then God’s verdict is clear: “worship nauseates him!” (paraphrasing Amos 5:21-24; Hos 6:6; Matt 23:23-24). Worship is not just about doing; it’s about being the kind of person God calls us to be. Anything less falls short of true worship.
3. **There’s an important sense in which worship must be detached from our subjective experience in order to see the value of repetition in spiritual formation.** Listen to James K. A. Smith:

“If you think of worship as a bottom-up, expressive endeavor, repetition will seem insincere and inauthentic. But when you see worship as an invitation to a top-down encounter in which God is refashioning your deepest habits, then repetition looks very different: it’s how God re-habituates us. In a formational paradigm, repetition isn’t insincere, because you’re not *showing*, you’re *submitting*. This is crucial because there is no formation without habituation. Virtue formation takes practice, and there is no practice that is not repetitive. We willingly embrace repetition as a good in all kinds of other sectors of our life—to hone our golf swing, our piano prowess, and our mathematical abilities, for example. If the sovereign Lord has created us as creatures of habit, why should we think repetition is inimical to our spiritual growth?” (*You Are What You Love*, p 80).
4. **Worship is not limited by location (Jn 4:21-24).** Jesus teaches, “God is spirit” (having no physical form) meaning he is not geographically or spatially bound. Thus, God is spiritually present to everyone at all times and relationally present to different people under different circumstances (Ps 51:9-11; Mk 15:34; 2 Thess 1:9). One of the implications of this theological truth is that we can worship God anywhere! “And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age” (Matt 28:20).