

“The Potential of Relational Discipleship”

Acts 2:42; 1 John 1:1-4; 2:7-11

This morning, we are going to continue in our series that we have called, “The Convictions of a Disciple-Making Church,” in which we are simply taking a look at what the early church made priority.* We have considered three of these already:

- the power of corporate prayer
- the priority of biblical teaching
- the practice of personal evangelism

There is a fourth conviction that I want to point out to you and it involves relational discipleship. The church in the New Testament is not a group of loosely connected individuals, but is instead a body of believers who share in a common life. Find Acts 2:42 in your Bible...

I’m sure that somewhere along the way, you have heard the expression, “Fake it ‘till you make it.” It is a concept which suggests that by imitating confidence or competence in some area, a person can usually get by and masquerade their insecurities. I don’t know who coined the phrase, but it is a terrible way to approach life. We all need those in our lives with whom we can be transparent and vulnerable. We live in a ‘fake it ‘till you make it’ kind of society. Though we are more connected electronically with the rest of the world than we’ve ever been, the irony is that we are also more disconnected relationally. And this has taken its toll out on the local church. Shallow and superficial connection to a local church has led to a crisis where church can be described as a whole bunch of people who are trying their dead level best to ‘fake it’ until they make it.

When I look at the church in the New Testament, nowhere do I find it approached this way. Instead, we are able to find a beautiful tapestry of different people from different backgrounds who are woven together in a family of faith who share a common life together in Christ. The church is not simply a loose gathering of people who sit and listen to one person preach. As important as that is, it is really only part of the equation. A church is made up of men and women who are connected to one another. One person's life touches the life of another, who then touches the lives of other people in his or her sphere of influence, who in turn do the same thing, resulting in a contagious context.

The church is more than a place where we see people as heads to count and money to collect. Instead, we need to see one another as brothers and sisters with whom we are to connect. We share a common life. The gospel has bound us together in Christ which means we no longer live with a “fake it ‘till we make it” attitude.

There is a word used in the New Testament to describe this special type of relationship we have with one another—it is the word ***‘fellowship.’*** Fellowship is a good word, it is a biblical word, and it is also a misunderstood word. It refers to something far richer, far deeper than mere handshakes and potlucks. I know it may be hard for a lot of us baptists to believe, but you don't have to have a chicken leg in your hand to have fellowship. It is not something that is kept strictly to a ‘fellowship hall’ where food is served and meals are enjoyed. That's why we need to think of fellowship for what it is—***relational discipleship.***

The fourth conviction of a disciple-making church involves fellowship, or relational discipleship that binds us together. We believe in practicing relational discipleship because disciples grow in the context of the common relationship we have with one another as believers. God never has intended for you to live out

your Christianity in isolation from others. He saved you to place you in His family. The gospel tells me how I can have a personal relationship with God, but that doesn't mean it is a private relationship. It is not something that's lived out in isolation, but rather is lived out in community. In coming to Christ, who is Head of the body, every single Christian gets connected to every other Christian. Union with Christ brings us into communion with His church. Look at what the Bible says:

Acts 2:42—“And they devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.”

What you notice when you read that verse is the common, shared life that the believers have. It's expressed in the word that is translated as 'fellowship.'

“Fellowship” — *word is 'koinonia' and means common; the basic idea refers to that which is shared; life of Christ*

The breaking of bread refers to the Lord's table and was an expression of their fellowship. Prayer was an expression of fellowship. Verse 44 says all of the believers were together and had all things in common. They held their possessions in common trust, so that if anyone had a need, they would gladly sell what they had to give to the one who had the need. Day by day they were continuing with one accord in the temple. Breaking bread, that is having meals, from house to house. Eating meals together with gladness, sincerity of heart. This is a community of people, a family that is committed to one another. This is the expression of the life of the church, and describes mutual commitment.

Fellowship is critical to the life of the church. Christianity is not a spectator event that happens on Sunday. It is not simply a one day a week activity. Instead, it is a common, shared life with other believers.

Nowhere in the New Testament are we able to find greater emphasis on what true fellowship is and what it looks like than in 1 John. In five brief, albeit power packed chapters, John makes it abundantly clear that his concern is not just that believers have a good time together. People in bar can have a good time together, but that is not fellowship. Rather, he wants to ensure that our coming together as the church is anchored in the truth of who Jesus is and what He has done for us through His death and resurrection. Christian fellowship is relational discipleship. It is the mutual sharing of the life of Christ among the believers.

It is the gospel being lived out in community, a beautiful picture of how Jesus Christ redeems lost and alienated sinners and makes them a part of His family. Within the opening verses of his letter, John mentions the purpose of his writing:

1 John 1:3—“That which we have seen and heard we proclaim also to you, so that you too may have fellowship with us.”

Within this small letter, the apostle John passionately explains the importance of relational discipleship. Through faith in Jesus, we now are able to have fellowship both with God and one another. At least three things are involved:

1. A common LIFE that is experienced (1:1-4)

“That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we looked upon and have touched with our hands, concerning the word of life—the life was made manifest, and we have seen it, and testify to it and proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and was made manifest to us—that which we have seen and heard we proclaim also to you, so that you too may have fellowship with us; and indeed our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ. And we are writing these things so that our joy may be complete.”

Our common life in Christ has both a vertical dimension as well as a horizontal dimension. Before we can truly have fellowship with one another, we must first be in fellowship with God.

John says, “We saw Him, we looked at Him, we touched Him with our hands, this living Word of Life.” In other words, he is saying, “We have had fellowship with Christ.” He says this much in verse 3, “...and indeed our fellowship is with the Father and with Son Jesus Christ.” Before we can fellowship with one another, we must first be in right relationship with God. Without the vertical dimension, then what we do relationally has no depth, no meaning because it isn’t founded upon the truth.

John says, “We lived up close and personal with Him. He was manifested. We have seen Him. We testify to Him. We proclaim His gospel of eternal life, which was manifested to us. Now, we proclaim it to you.” Why? Look at the first part of verse 3— *“So that you too may have fellowship with us, and indeed our fellowship is with the Father and with His Son, Jesus Christ.”*

Vertical fellowship with Jesus Christ is intended to result in horizontal fellowship with His church. John says, “Our message serves this purpose—that you too may have fellowship with us!” The proclamation of the gospel is not an end in itself. The proclamation of the gospel is not to produce individual, isolated Christians. The preaching of the gospel is intended to produce a fellowship, a shared, common life, a common purpose and ministry. The goal of the gospel is not just your individual salvation from hell. It is not just your own individual forgiveness. While I’m grateful to God this is true, we can’t forget that the gospel makes us part of a family. The goal of the gospel is fellowship with God and fellowship with other believers.

Fellowship isn't something that is theoretical; it is intensely practical. It should work itself out in our interactions with one another. When 'koinonia' is used in the New Testament, it always has togetherness in mind—sharing in something together. Believers have something in common that they share with one another.

illus. of marbles vs. grapes

We have a shared gospel. We have a shared eternal life. We have a shared faith. We have a shared love, poured out in our hearts. We have a shared purpose—the glory of God in all things. We have a shared ministry and mission—the spreading of the gospel and the advancement of the kingdom. We possess a shared authority—the revelation of God in Scripture. We possess a shared power—the Holy Spirit. We are, literally, the temple of the Holy Spirit both collectively and individually. And all of this is made possible through fellowship!

2. A common LIGHT that is expressed (1:5-10)

“This is the message we have heard from him and proclaim to you, that God is light, and in him is no darkness at all. If we say we have fellowship with him while we walk in darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth. 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 cleanses us from all sin. If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. If we say we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us.”

John proceeds to draw a contrast between those who are in the fellowship and those who are out of the fellowship. It is a contrast between those who are saved and those who aren't saved, those who walk in the light, and those who walk in darkness.

John says those who walk in the light have fellowship with Christ and with one another. We share in a common cleansing—the blood of Jesus Christ cleanses us from all sin!

Sin is destructive to fellowship. Sin attacks and assaults the relationship the believer has with the Lord. And it also assaults and attacks the believers' relationships with one other. It shatters our unity, restricts our ministry, halts our power, confuses our purpose. Pride, lust, materialism, sin in every single category. It cripples the unity that would demonstrate Christ to the world.

As brothers and sisters, we share in a common confession of sin. We have a shared hope in the gospel and the promise that our sins are forgiven in Christ. We tend to think of confession as something that is private, but John includes it in a paragraph in which he is describing the fellowship that we have with one another.

James 5:16—“Confess your trespasses to one another, and pray for one another, that you may be healed. The effective, fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much.”

Fellowship doesn't masquerade behind a religious facade. It doesn't live in an ivory tower where mistakes cannot be made. Instead, it is an open book with a messy story of grace experienced and grace expressed.

3. A common LOVE that is extended (2:7-11)

“Beloved, I am writing you no new commandment, but an old commandment that you had from the beginning. The old commandment is the word that you have heard. At the same time, it is a new commandment that I am writing to you, which is true in him and in you, because the darkness is passing away and the

true light is already shining. Whoever says he is in the light and hates his brother is still in darkness. Whoever loves his brother abides in the light, and in him there is no cause for stumbling. But whoever hates his brother is in the darkness and walks in the darkness, and does not know where he is going, because the darkness has blinded his eyes.”

John builds his argument in 1 John around several ‘tests’ to see whether or not a person’s faith is genuine.

- the doctrinal test
- the obedience test
- the faith test
- the love test

If we have no love for our brothers and sisters, then it may be a sign that we are not truly in the faith. Love for the church will manifest itself in desire for fellowship. We love one another the way that God has loved us in Christ.

1 John 4:11-12—“Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God abides in us and His love is perfected in us.”

Tony Evans—*“You can’t see God, who is invisible. But His presence in your life becomes real as you love your brothers and sisters in Christ’s body. God will make Himself at home in your life through the Holy Spirit, and His presence will become visibly real to you—not through your physical eyes, but in terms of your spiritual experience. He will give you the vertical reality you’re looking for as you make the horizontal connection with other believers.”*

Christian fellowship makes Christ visible to the world.

Aristides — *“It is the Christians, O Emperor, who have sought and found the truth, for they acknowledge God. They do not keep for themselves the goods entrusted to them. They do not covet what belongs to others. They show love to their neighbours. They do not do to another what they would not wish to have done to themselves. They speak gently to those who oppress them, and in this way they make them their friends. It has become their passion to do good to their enemies. They live in the awareness of their smallness. Every one of them who has anything gives ungrudgingly to the one who has nothing. If they see a travelling stranger, they bring him under their roof. They rejoice over him as over a real brother, for they do not call one another brothers after the flesh, but they know they are brothers in the Spirit and in God. If they hear that one of them is imprisoned or oppressed for the sake of Christ, they take care of all his needs. If possible they set him free. If anyone among them is poor or comes into want while they themselves have nothing to spare, they fast two or three days for him. In this way they can supply any poor man with the food he needs. This, O Emperor, is the rule of life of the Christians, and this is their manner of life.”*

I can't imagine growing up in a home where no one in the family expressed their love for one another, a family that never expressed love through hugs, gifts, actions, and words. Some of you may have painful memories when you think of what your family dynamic was like. Think about how important expressions of love are to our relationships. Without the expression of love, a marriage can become strained. Without the expression of love, families can grow apart. Children need the love of family to grow and thrive.

No wonder John says here that true fellowship involves a common love that is extended to our brothers and sisters in the body of Christ! John drives this point

home because decades before, Jesus had driven this same point home with His disciples. John wrote about it in his gospel account.

John 13:1 — “Having loved His own who were in the world, He loved them to the end.”

Jesus expressed His love for His disciples by washing their feet and ultimately going to the cross where He laid down his life for them. It was a lesson John would never forget.

John 13:25 — “By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another.”

We have no right to desire to grow closer to God if at the same time we are okay with remaining estranged from one another. One of the big reasons that a lot of people sense distance in their relationship with God is because they've forsaken fellowship—there's no 'koinonia.' It is not because God has forsaken them. No, they've forsaken His body, the local church. Not the building, but the body. They've fenced themselves in while pushing others out.

The story is told about a man who lived in a small town, whose loved one died without having any funeral arrangements made. When the man discovered that the deceased didn't have a burial plot, he went to the head of the local parish seeking permission to bury his loved one in the parish's fenced-in graveyard. But he was told, “I'm sorry, but this cemetery is reserved for members of our church. Besides, there isn't any room for an extra grave inside the fence.” The man went away disappointed, but the next day he got word that a grave had been dug inside the fence for his family member. He went to the head of the parish and said, “I don't understand. We're not members here, and you said there wasn't

any room. How did we get a place inside the fence?” The parish official said, “I thought about it last night, and I simply moved the fence.”

Let me tell you something—that is exactly what God did for fallen humanity in our helpless condition. He came into the boneyard of humanity, took on flesh, died in the sinner’s place, and was resurrected. In His mercy and grace, He ‘moved the fence’ by reaching out to us so that those of us who were on the outside can now belong on the inside through faith in Jesus Christ. And those who are now inside the fence not only become children of God, but we also become related to one another as brothers and sisters. Perhaps it is now time for us to also ‘move the fence’ so that we can experience the richness of fellowship with each other. Too many of us want to put up a fence and barricade ourselves within. John says that love for our brothers and sisters is a sign that we have passed from death unto life. (1 John 3:14)

Go back to **Acts 2:42** for a moment. Look at what says and then consider what it doesn’t say—*“And they devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.”* It doesn’t say anything about developing programs, it doesn’t say they founded a school, it doesn’t say they hosted theological seminars, it doesn’t say they went out and found a building. It just says they poured their loving lives into each other. I pray that this will always be what characterizes us here at GSBC.

If we are going to intentionally make fellowship—relational discipleship—a core conviction of our church, then let me close with a few principles for the sake of application:

- **Principle #1**—*Fellowship demands proximity.*

This means that we take seriously the time and opportunity to spend time together in worship and in small groups. We can't do life together unless we are close to one another.

- **Principle #2**—*Fellowship promotes unity.*

Jesus prayed for unity among His disciples, and fellowship seeks to preserve and protect that unity.

- **Principle #3**—*Fellowship accepts diversity.*

True fellowship means that we respect the personality differences, the cultural differences, and the unique gifts of each member of the body. The fellowship of the church ought to reflect the diversity of the kingdom.

- **Principle #4**—*Fellowship requires humility.*

We can't go around here demanding our way because it is destructive to 'koinonia.' Instead, both our attitude and interactions with one another must reflect the humility that Paul described in Philippians 2.

- **Principle #5**—*Fellowship opens possibility.*

A church that makes relational discipleship a true priority will open itself up to the possibility of real growth. No longer will we be content simply with 'my four and no more.' Rather than being focused on ourselves, our focus will be on others.

- **Principle #6**—*Fellowship pictures eternity.*

The 'koinonia' that we have with one another as the body of Christ is a picture of eternity; it is a small taste of heaven here on earth. It makes the invisible visible. It takes the spiritual and makes it tangible.

How are you making fellowship—the relational aspect of discipleship—a priority in your life? How are you helping to contribute to the ‘koinonia’ we share at GSBC?

If you have never been saved, the first step to fellowship with God is confessing your sin to Him and trusting Christ as your Lord and Savior. He gave His life for you so you can have fellowship with God, and so you can be part of His eternal family.