

Fellowship & Worship

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[0 : 0 0] prayer and the breaking of bread. Now last week we looked at the apostles teaching what that means for us how we might then devote ourselves to the word of God to scripture. Today I want to look at all the rest. Now one of the criticisms that often gets leveled at churches that are especially devoted to studying scripture and studying a lot of theology is that they're all kind of head knowledge. All about the head knowledge constantly debating theological minutiae and not much else.

It's all about that head knowledge and you might say well theologically conservative Presbyterians of which we are would fall into that camp. In fact I came across a joke that fairly appropriately describes Presbyterians. I've written it down so I don't mess it up here but I saw this this week.

So the question how many Presbyterians does it take to change a light bulb? The answer is one to change it, another to reprimand the first for changing it on the theological grounds that light bulbs are predestined to go on and off and humans should not interfere with providence.

A third to bring the issue to the session to the elders. The session then to divide and to bring it to the presbytery. A committee at presbytery to also divide and bring the issue to the general assembly.

A committee and two subcommittees at the general assembly to draft a report to do a study and to come up with a position. The general assembly to then vote and pass the resolution and then a disgruntled minority that votes to leave and protest and form the Presbyterian church of non-light bulb changing.

[1 : 3 9] Presbyterians have something of an earned reputation for being a little bit too preoccupied with theological minutiae. And so one of the criticisms sometimes brought against that kind of a church is that you guys are, you just head knowledge. You just talk and you just gain knowledge but you don't do much else. Where's the life change? Now I think that is a relatively simplistic generalization and I could give you all sorts of pushback about why the Bible and theology is important. We talked about that last week.

But I think that a reasonable case as you look at this list is that Scripture necessarily comes with other things. It is almost coupled, or more than coupled because there's more than two here, but with other things that reinforce that Apostle's teaching. And the Word of God might be instrumental in terms of true change and true growth, like you need it, you have to have it there. Someone's got to preach the Word. We saw that in that Ephesians passage. The pastors, the elders, the teachers, they've got to teach the Word so that the body grows up. But it never comes alone. It doesn't come naked. There are other marks that need to be there alongside. And so if you got last week's sermon down, like you listen to the sermon, you're like, yep, sorted, done that tick. I study the Scriptures all the time. I'm devoted to the Apostle's teaching. I do what the text says. Well then, how do you continue to grow in that? And what else should you be considering? And I think that's what the rest of verse 42 answers for us this morning. So two things I want you to see. Two things you need.

Number one, you need fellowship. And number two, you need worship. You need fellowship and you need worship. Here's the first one, fellowship. Have a look at verse 42 again. It says, they devoted themselves to the Apostle's teaching and to the fellowship. Now, after devoting themselves to the Apostle's teaching, to the Word of God, the next thing that these people give themselves to is fellowship. Again, that word devoted is there. It's a strong word. That word devoted comes at the beginning of the sentence. It doesn't just pertain to the Apostle's teaching.

It pertains to all the things in the list. So they devoted themselves to fellowship as well. And it's an ongoing devotion as well. That word in the original language has a sort of continuous sense. Not one-off devotion. Ongoing devotion to fellowship.

Fellowship is one of those terms in the English language, I think, that has a range of meaning. It's a fairly specific term in the New Testament. It's the Greek word *koinonia*.

[4 : 21] It can mean a bunch of related ideas like partnership or association or participation or sharing or being of one mind together. So if you go through the rest of the New Testament, you look for this word, you'll find that in the New Testament, giving monetary contributions to relieve the poor can be described as fellowship. The New Testament will also talk about sharing in the sufferings of Christ as fellowship. And so it's way more than just hanging out with a bunch of people who you like.

Like socializing with a bunch of people that you like. Fellowship in the New Testament, I think, is a oneness of heart, mind, and purpose with accompanying action.

A oneness of heart, mind, and purpose with accompanying action. You see this actually played out later on in the same passage. So look at verse 44. All the believers were together and had everything in common.

They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had a need. So their oneness of heart, their oneness of mind, their oneness of purpose led to them to be unbelievably generous here with their material wealth. They shared it with those who had need in the community. If you look down verse 46.

Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes. They ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God, enjoying the favor of all the people.

[5 : 47] And the Lord added to their number, deity, those who were being saved. So they lived their lives in each other's spaces here. Sharing meals, sharing life. And then, interestingly, they grew. They grew rapidly as a result of this.

And so you might look at this and think, well, what is the connection between this sort of fellowship and a growing church? And I think the answer to that is embodiment.

So what I mean by that is the story of the gospel, that message that is core to the apostles' teaching, what they were listening to, they're already devoted to that.

That gospel needs to be embodied in real lives, lived together. So the good news, that through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, God has saved a people for himself, a new community from all walks of life, from all tribes, nations, and tongues.

That gospel needs to then be embodied in a living, breathing community. I used to like the idea of having my own children.

[7 : 02] Wait, wait for it. I like the idea of having a kid, pre-having a kid. They would kind of look up to me, their dad, that I would indoctrinate in all my loves for sport, dress them up in Arsenal kit, make them sing all the Arsenal songs.

But it was just an idea at that point in my life. And if you'd shown me how disgusting changing a nappy is, or babies screaming at 3 a.m. in the morning where there's absolutely nothing that you can do to make them go to sleep, no amount of rocking, no amount of medication, or anything can make them go to sleep.

If you'd shown all that to me, and you'd shown it to me in like really, really graphic detail, so I could really see how bad it is, not just be told about it, because there's a difference. Then my nice idea of having a child might have wavered.

There is no contraception quite like a poopy nappy. So that nice idea might have waned. But when I finally then got that squidgy little child, and I held her for the first time, I then all of a sudden had that idea embodied for me.

It was no longer just a nice idea about what could be. It was what was. And I cannot, cannot, cannot adequately explain to you what it did to my attitude and my emotion to have this embodiment of a nice idea now in my hands.

[8 : 34] And now that I have that embodied idea, two of them actually, in retrospect, a thousand poopy nappies actually didn't seem like that big a price to pay. Now I suspect that Christian fellowship does something like that for the gospel.

If you leave the gospel in the realm of abstract ideas, a nice idea, but just out there, it will lose pride of place in your heart when struggle or hardship comes along.

In fact, Jesus actually teaches this in the parable of the soils. He says this exact thing. But if that gospel, that word, that apostle's teaching, if that gospel is embodied in a living, breathing community of single-minded people, it'll be that much harder to then dislodge from the center of your heart.

In almost more than a decade and a half of ministry now, I have seen so many people walk away from the gospel because they first walked away from community. Timothy Keller writes this, and he says, our character is mainly shaped by our primary social community, the people with whom we eat, play, converse, and study.

Think about that for a second. Our character is mainly shaped, he says, by our primary social community. That obviously places a huge premium on the family unit as a place where character is shaped because that's where people spend most of their time.

[10 : 06] But then after that, you've got to think really hard, well, who am I going to make that primary community? Who is going to be in my life? Who's going to say things to me? Who am I going to spend time with? Because that's going to impact upon what my character ends up being like.

You want the gospel at the heart of your character, who you are, you cannot get that apart from a gospel-shaped community and the fellowship that comes from being deeply, deeply embedded in such a community.

So let me say a couple of things by way of application on this point. Number one, make sure you are in community. I think a lot of people treat church like they treat a shop or a restaurant.

So they go into this establishment occasionally. They procure goods or a service is rendered to them. Maybe they offer some cash. Sometimes they don't. And then after receiving their goods or their particular service, then they leave.

And then they only come back again when they've run out or they feel the need for that particular service again. So it's a completely consumeristic mindset and approach. I need some spiritual upliftment, so what I do is I go to church.

[11 : 17] The pastor preaches a sermon, giving me my spiritual goods. He prays some prayers for me, rendering me a service. We sing some songs. I put some money in the offering box. I might even grab a coffee afterwards and offer a few people a couple of polite, how are you's.

And then I leave. Have my goods. Service has been rendered. I prayed and I gave some money, so there's been the transaction. Friends, that's consumers.

So many people basically have that sort of consumeristic relationship with church. And so there's a very real sense in which you can be in church, but not in fellowship.

You can be sitting here on Sunday, but not actually be in fellowship. One of the most common ways that the term fellowship, *koinonia*, is used in the New Testament is to talk about our fellowship as Christians with God.

So the Apostle John in 1 John 1 verse 3, he says that if we believe the gospel that the apostles handed down to us, then we have fellowship with the Father and fellowship with the Son.

[12 : 29] Now we know from the rest of the New Testament what that fellowship entails, right? It entails all sorts of amazing things like union with Christ, like being adopted into God's family, like the forgiveness of sins, the declaring of us as righteous in God's sight, bringing us into the Father's love.

So there's, in all that imagery, there's incredibly deep inclusion, but then there's also really deep cost that comes alongside that. So we got into God's family, we got into that love because of God's covenant love to us in Christ.

In order to secure that relationship that the Apostle John describes as fellowship, Christ shed his blood. Christ got nailed to the cross. Christ was crucified.

So our fellowship with God, our fellowship with the Son is one of deep, deep, deep inclusion, but it's also one of deep, deep cost on the part of Jesus.

And that's the term that the Apostle John wants to use, fellowship, to talk about that, that dynamic. So if you think about that, there is no way, no way possible that having a consumeristic interaction with the church every second Sunday or so can in any way be reconciled with the biblical concept of fellowship.

[13 : 46] This is not the same thing. It's a category mistake. We're talking about two radically different things here. This is a blood-bought covenant community. And some of us might be treating it like a pick and pay.

And then you're kind of wondering, well, why is my faith stuttering? Why do my prayers feel so weak? Why does my zeal feel so, so, so insipid? And your belief wavers when challenge or hardship or just the general busyness of life comes.

And so the first thing I say to you is make sure you are actually in community. Make sure you're actually in fellowship. But then the second thing is invite others into community.

Invite others into fellowship. So one of the best things you can do to strengthen and to grow the faith of others is to invite them into deeper gospel community. You might not be a great theologian.

You might not be like an amazing Bible study leader who can help teach the Bible and enrich people and help them grow in their faith in all sorts of theological ways or devotional ways. But sometimes the most profound thing that you can do to grow another person's faith is simply to include them.

[15 : 03] To say, hey, come. Come in. Come share. Come share. Because when they're included into that fellowship, into that gospel community, into a gospel preaching church, that gospel word that they're regularly hearing from the pulpit or from Bible studies, well, all of a sudden now it's being reinforced by this embodied community around them that you have now invited them into.

It's a simple thing. It's not rocket science. You don't have to go to seminary to do that. You don't have to learn Greek or Hebrew to do that. In fact, don't learn Greek and Hebrew. You might be better placed to invite people in.

They might be put off if you want to start talking Hebrew with them and then inviting them into church community. What it does is it just adds layer after layer after layer of reinforcement to their growth.

That's what it does. Fellowship is a key feature of sustainable growing faith and a sustainable growing church. Now the second thing, worship. Have a look again.

Verse 42. They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching, to fellowship, to the breaking of bread, and to prayer. There's been considerable debate about the last two things in the list here.

[16:13] The breaking of bread and prayer. Are they two separate things? Should they be regarded as two separate things or as one thing? Are they formal activities of the church? Are they informal activities in the church?

What is obscured a little bit in your, if you've got an NIV like I read from in that text, is that there's actually a definite article before the breaking of the bread and before prayer.

So it's they devoted themselves to the breaking of the bread. They devoted themselves to the prayers. And that's caused several commentators like John Stott, the great Anglican minister and commentator, to suggest that what Luke is actually speaking about here is not just people eating in each other's homes.

Although we know they did that from verse 46 further down. But what Luke is maybe speaking about here is their specific times of gathering for worship.

Times that included communion or the Lord's Supper, the breaking of bread, and formal prayers. So we already know what the gatherings had in the apostles' teaching.

[17:20] We know they were teaching the word. And now we get to see two other things, communion and prayer. So let's look at those two things. What is it about communion and prayer that would drive Christians to make them a standing commitment, a regular standing commitment?

I want to look at them in reverse order from the way they occur in the text here. So prayer first. Key feature of the first worship gatherings, we're told, yeah, and we actually see this a little bit later on in the book of Acts, was prayer.

Now I can imagine from what we know from the rest of Scripture that they prayed for all sorts of different things when they gathered. They prayed prayers of praise and thanksgiving, prayers for the needs of people, prayers of confession and repentance, prayers for the well-being and the growth of their church.

Remember, this snapshot that Luke gives us of the early church comes directly after Pentecost, directly after the Spirit is poured out upon these people at Pentecost.

So the Spirit of God has been poured out, the supernatural power of Jesus Christ that He said, hey, you need to wait before this comes. That has now come and it's been unleashed. Now how do you tap into that spiritual power? How do you encourage the Spirit of God to work in and through you?

[18:32] Well, it's not an impersonal spiritual power. You don't go to Hogwarts or something like it to try and figure out, like, well, how do I manipulate this Spirit? It's a personal spiritual power because it comes through a person, the Spirit of God.

God's Spirit is in you if you are a Christian. You want to see Him act. You do the same thing you do in any other interpersonal relationship. You ask Him.

You ask Him to act. And so the thing that you see Christians doing and prioritizing all the way through the book of Acts is praying, speaking to God, asking Him to do the Spirit's work in them.

So friends, I want to say do not, do not, do not, do not think that you can grow as a Christian without serious sustained prayer. Do not think that a church can grow without serious and sustained prayer.

You'll notice that in verse 47, right at the end of this section, when Luke mentions the church's growth, he says, And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved. God did it.

[19 : 45] These people preach the gospel. Of course they did. They lived out their faith publicly. They must have been doing that. But God did it. God's Spirit working through them did it as they prayed for Him to do it.

Asked Him to do something. See, one of our biggest problems, I think, since the Garden of Eden, is that we've wanted to control things.

We've wanted to be God. We want to run our own lives. We want to have full autonomy over absolutely everything. It's that unbridled desire for autonomy that I think causes so much of our pain and our heartache in this world.

So much of it. Everybody's out there. You've got a world full of people who are trying to assert his or her own autonomy over the next person in pursuit of self-interest.

We're selfish creatures at heart and it's really killing us. You can actually, interestingly, find a lot of non-Christian, secular authors and thinkers who would basically sign off on what I just said there.

[20 : 49] That self-interest is our biggest problem. Even the atheist Richard Dawkins in his book, *The Selfish Gene*, basically makes this argument. And he basically says, we know that selfishness is an inherent problem because of our biology.

And so now that we're smart enough, we should try and figure out using our brains how to work against it because it's ripping our society apart. Those writers, those thinkers obviously wouldn't believe in the same origin of that selfishness as us because they don't believe in original sin.

But they're pretty keen to sign off and say, well, it's there. It's definitely there. It's inherent. It's deep. It's there. And it's breaking us down. We're by nature selfish and it's killing us.

Prayer, though, prayer rips that inflated sense of self out from under us.

It's kind of God's master plan to humble us and to fix us. Because when you're praying, what are you doing? You're asserting his authority over yours.

[21 : 53] You're saying, the act of prayer itself is saying, I am not in charge. You are in charge. You're looking to his interests, not to yours.

God-focused prayer breaks down selfishness. That's why historically Christian saints have prayed on their knees or even prostrate on the floor, using their body, their posture to show, I'm not king.

I'm not in charge. God is king. God is king. And so you want your faith to grow? You want the church to grow? Let the king be the king.

Take yourself off the throne. Let the king be the king and pray. There is no spiritual discipline more effective for letting the king be the king than pray. And then, when the king is the king, when his saints are regularly gathering to humble themselves in God-centered prayer, well, I think that's when things happen.

And I don't mean this in that kind of weird tit-for-tat thing. God in his sovereign providence works things out the way he wants to. But he uses prayer. He delights to use prayer and make big things happen. Prayer changes things. It moves mountains.

[23 : 07] It has in history. I think a lot of pastors and a lot of people who like to read a lot of dense theology, a lot of people who laughed at that earlier joke at the beginning. You like that sort of stuff.

They all go through a point in their theological education where I think they become fascinated in the issue of revivals. So what I mean by revivals are moments in church history, if you look back at the history of the church, where the ordinary work and worship of the church just sort of gets supercharged by the Holy Spirit.

And so you get this outsized fruit in ministry. More conversions. More disciples being made. More confession of sin. More repentance. More repentance. Like if you go read about the stuff that happened around Andrew Murray in Wellington and that in the 1800s.

Like just weird stuff. Where it seems like people were going to church and then all of a sudden a lot of people were going to church. And there's no real rhyme or reason for why that happened. Now my favorite revival, if you're allowed to have a favorite revival, is the Fulton Street Revival.

Not least of all because I once stayed in an apartment of a friend's which is right on the block in the downtown of New York City where the Fulton Street Revival. The Fulton Street Revival broke out. But what was somewhat unique about this revival was that it was not led by famous preachers and evangelists.

[24 : 27] Like you've heard of people like the Wesleys and the Whitfields and that who led these great revivals. Jonathan Edwards. This one was not like that. There were no big names associated with this. No big preaching crusades associated with this.

But like the majority of revivals recorded in church history, prayer was front and center of what happened here. So this comes from Ed Stetzer.

He's a missiologist. He writes about the growth of the church and he says this. He describes the revival. He says, He didn't have WhatsApp so he couldn't go, Where are you guys?

The group decided to meet the next week and there were 14. The next week there were 23. The following week there were 40. Within weeks there were thousands of business leaders meeting daily.

God moved so powerfully that the prayer meeting spread across the nation. It is estimated that nearly a million people were converted out of a national population of 35 million. Including 10,000 weekly conversions in New York City for a season.

[26 : 03] A biblical church gathers to worship God in prayer. That's what we pray. You'll see that in church.

We pray all sorts of different prayers. Prayers of adoration. Prayers of confession. Prayers of commissioning. One of the little questions I gave for the kids in the tweens Bible study.

As they come into the service this morning. Was to count the number of times we pray in the service. And try and make a list of the different types of prayers that we pray. But we pray in our services. We set aside times to pray in the church.

So in our city groups. In our small groups. We set aside time to pray. We have quarterly prayer meetings where we come together to pray. And then we have the Sunday morning prayer meeting. Half an hour before church upstairs. That John and some other guys are helping to lead.

Where we come and deliberately pray about God's working in and through our church. We set aside those times to pray. When I think of those prayer meetings. And I think specifically of that Sunday morning one.

[27 : 02] The one before church. There's always a little part of me. That in the back of my mind is like. Fulton Street Revival. This is why this prayer meeting exists.

Because it's going to happen. John is going to be there this week. And it's just going to be the five buddies. That he kind of twisted their arm. And said you need to come with me to prayer meeting. And then the next week.

It's going to be 10. And then the next week it's going to be 15. And then the next week it's going to be like half the church there. And then it's just going to carry on. And then people who are not even in our church. Are going to start coming off the street. And coming to this prayer meeting.

Now friends that hasn't happened yet. But it could. There's no good reason why it couldn't. Will we humble ourselves and pray?

Will we seek the face of the Lord? Will we take ourselves off of the throne. And let the king be king. Then communion. That term the breaking of bread.

[28 : 01] Almost I think certainly refers to the Lord's Supper. Instituted by Jesus Christ. And so you might say. Well why this symbolic remembrance meal. This covenant sign. Why is it such a centerpiece of Christian worship.

And what does it have to do with the growing church? Let me put it this way for you. If I say the name. Hector Peterson. An image comes to your mind right?

If an image doesn't come to your mind. And you're a South African. The Americans are excused for this. But if you're a South African. And an image doesn't come to your mind. You need to go and do some homework. When I say Hector Peterson. There's an image that comes to your mind.

You can see that black and white image very clearly. You can see 18 year old Mbuisa. Carrying 13 year old Hector. And his sister Antoinette.

Running next to them. You can see the terror. In Mbuisa's eyes. Now that image doesn't just stand. To remind us of the Soweto uprising in 1976.

[29 : 03] It stands for so much more than that in this country. It stands for the struggle. Against unjust oppression. It stands for the cost. Endured by the majority.

At the hands of a corrupt minority. It stands for the inhumanity of oppression. But also the resilience of the human spirit. To endure. It's an icon.

That has really, really deep meaning. In this country. It warns us. Against our past. It inspires us to want a better future.

It almost. It almost feeds us. In the face of prison struggles. It's this iconic symbol for all South Africans. I think as the human race.

We instinctively know that ultimate victory. Never, never comes without great cost. Great suffering. And great struggle. That features in all our greatest stories. Fiction and non-fiction stories.

[30 : 03] And so it should be no surprise then. That it is at the center of the greatest of all stories. And there we have this iconic symbol too. This is my body broken for you.

This is my life blood poured out for the full atonement of sin. The table. The sign of the ultimate struggle.

The struggle against sin and death. It's the sign of the ultimate cost. The life of the Son of God. It's the sign of the ultimate victory. Forgiveness and complete atonement of sin.

But it's not just a symbol that inspires us. It's a grace that is offered to us. Come to this table.

And be cleansed of your sin. Come to this table. And death will no longer be that long shadow that hangs over your life. Come to this table. And you will have life.

[31 : 01] Come to this table. And you will have true fellowship for the first time in your life. The apostle Paul says that the bread is a koinonia in the body of Christ.

And the cup is a koinonia in the blood of Christ. The grace of God and the fellowship with God is poured out and is sealed at that table.

A church that doesn't keep that table central will not grow. Because it will not have the grace to regularly offer weary, broken, sin-burdened people.

When I think of that word, fellowshiping, this won't surprise you guys. But when I think of that word, fellowship, the image that most comes to my mind is feasting. Spending an evening with some of your most intimate friends.

Eating good food, having good soul-enriching conversation. That's what I think of when I think of fellowship.

[32 : 12] Here's what the 19th century hymn writer Horatius Bonar writes about the Lord's table. He says, The costly love of our Lord Jesus Christ has opened access to the feast for you and me.

The feast of true fellowship. Fellowship with the Father. Fellowship with the Son. Fellowship with the Spirit. Fellowship with His people. That feast in fellowship and worship needs to be embodied in a living community.

A living, breathing church. It was in the book of Acts. I pray that we'll be here at the Union Chapel. And I pray that you as an individual, as you don't just think on the church level, but as you think about yourself.

That you, as you hear these words, as you see this example and act. As you think about Christ's costly love that is poured at the table. That you will be driven by that. To dive deeper and deeper and deeper into fellowship and worship.

Because that's where you're truly going to grow. That's where you're truly going to be fed. That's where you're truly going to feast. Faith is not just intellectual and theological.

[33 : 34] Just comprehension. It's got to be embodied. And I pray that the Lord might, by the power of His Spirit, plunge you deeper and deeper into that embodiment.

Let's pray together. Our Father and our King, as we stand here about to go to the table, Lord, we are reminded of.

The cost. The cost at which this feast has been purchased for us. The cost of true fellowship. That we get to come into your family.

We get to be adopted into your family. We get union with Christ. We get our sins taken away. We get to be declared righteous because Christ laid down His life for us. Remind us of that cost, Lord.

Because it is only when we know and understand that cost that we will then be empowered and encouraged and inspired to dive deeper and deeper into this fellowship and to community. Me just standing up here and saying, guys, get more involved in church, that doesn't help.

[34 : 37] In fact, that just guilts us. But when we see Christ, we are changed. We want to be in this fellowship. We want to feast. Feast with the Father and feast with His people. Help us, Lord.

And I pray for any person who sits here this morning who says, I'm not sure I'm in that feast yet. I don't know if I've trusted in Jesus Christ. I don't know if I have salvation. I pray that you would bring them to a place of salvation this morning.

That they would repent of their sin and trust in Jesus Christ. Trust in His costly sacrifice to bring them home. Have that mercy upon us, Lord. Make us a church of deep, rich fellowship and worship.

We ask this for Christ's sake and His glory. Amen.