

# DEVOTED TO FELLOWSHIP

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Christian discipleship is not a solo adventure.

The first Christians shared devotion along four avenues of life:

- They were a learning church
- They were a together church
- They were a feasting church
- They were a praying church

*Acts 2:41* *Those who believed what Peter said were baptized and added to the church—about three thousand in all.*

***42 They joined with the other believers and devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, sharing in the Lord's Supper and in prayer.***

They “joined with the other believers.” This was a collective pursuit. They recognized the wisdom of the ancient sage: “Two are better than one...”

## **Koinonia**

Fellowship is a wonderful word, little known outside the church. It appears only four times in the (English) Old Testament, twice to describe Enoch's relationship with God, and once to describe Noah's, saying that they lived in “close fellowship” with God. Enoch's fellowship with God was so close that God took him directly to Heaven, and he did not taste death. Noah was so close that, out of all the people on the planet, God rescued only him and his family from the global flood that destroyed all others.

In the New Testament, where it appears about 20 times, it translates the Greek word, *koinonia*. This word means to participate together, or to share in common. Interestingly, its root is the word, *koinos*, which is used to describe things that are ordinary, everyday, or, for the Jews, ceremonially unclean. This adds the hint of sharing our ordinariness, and participating together in ordinary activities, like working and eating.

The early believers did the Christian life together. This was more than simply “being together.” They were sharing life together (as a “band of brothers”) as they followed Jesus. Their ups and downs, their trials and their victories.

Israel's sense of nationality was very different than ours (as Americans). Although they were known as separate tribes (families), they all came from one line of forefathers, shared the same history (for thousands of years), worshipped the same God, and spoke the same language.

Contrast that with America's stew pot of national and ethnic backgrounds over a meager two centuries, our plurality of religions, cultures, and languages, and you may see why we are typically strongly individualistic. "My" and "mine" are uber-important words for longtime Americans.

Compare that attitude with the one discovered by an anthropologist among the Xhosa people of South Africa. He proposed a game to the kids of one tribe. Placing a basket full of fruit near a distant tree, he told them that the first won to reach the tree would win all the sweet fruits. When he gave them the signal to start the race, they all took each other by the hand and ran together to the tree, then sat in a circle enjoying their treats.

The scientist asked them why they had chosen to run as a group, when they could have enjoyed more fruit individually. Their answer: "Ubuntu. How can one of us be happy if all the other ones are sad?" *Ubuntu* means "I am what I am because of who we all are." This is a common value among many African cultures, also expressed by the idea of projecting character (othering): a person actually becomes what others see him as.

This concept has particular application in Christian fellowship. If you think of a new Christian as that collection of faults and failings with which he entered the Kingdom of God, your attitude will be less than welcoming and may be off-putting or discouraging. On the other hand, if you think of that same new believer as the person whom Jesus has destined him to become (by God's grace and the power of the Spirit), your attitude and interactions will be encouragingly different.

This kind of mutual esteem and care for one another became characteristic of the Early Church. But those behaviors are rarely automatic; they usually require faith and intentionality. You must *choose* to regard another person in such ways, even after they disappoint you or hurt you. This is the choice of *love*.

The Early Church didn't hang out together because they were naturally close friends; some of them were natural enemies. They only became close friends because they had determined to do life together, according to the love of Jesus. They recognized the wisdom of the ancient sage: "Two are better than one..."

They "joined with the other believers." But they went even further: they "devoted themselves" to fellowship.

Do you remember what I have said about “devoting” yourself? Think of the Latin root words: *de-* (put off or away) and *votum* (choose for yourself). A Christian devotes himself or herself by relinquishing the right to choose, yielding that right to the Lord Jesus. It is like Jesus’ prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane on the eve of His execution: “Nevertheless, not what I want, but Your will be done.”

“Nevertheless” is a word full of meaning. It implies more than options (and surely there were options available to Jesus). He could have put it off to another time. He could have tried another method. Or, He could simply have abandoned the course His Father had set for Him. But to choose what He preferred over what the Father had chosen for Him would also mean rejecting His life-purpose, His destiny, and His identity. “Nevertheless” means “in spite of my other options and preferences.”

We should think *at least* twice before we choose what we prefer over what God has set before us. This is why we should not make major decisions without much prayer for wisdom from God above. Are you willing to set aside your right to choose in order to follow the Good Shepherd Jesus? If so, then you have become devoted to following Christ.

Christian fellowship involves:

- taking charge of your thoughts—for if you do not, your emotions will dictate your interactions with others, and you will tend to do just the opposite of what Jesus would do, “*who, when He was reviled, did not revile in return, and when He suffered, did not threaten.*” (1 Peter 2:23)
- forgiving those who hurt you—for close living will inevitably reveal differences (of opinion, of preference, of manner) which will generate conflicts, requiring us to “*be patient with one another, making allowance for each other’s faults because of [our] love.*” (Ephesians 4:2)
- submitting yourself to others—if you truly “*esteem other better than [yourself]*” (Philippians 2:3), we will share control and leadership with others, creating a genuine sense of team.
- showing hospitality—this includes more than your family, opening your heart, your home, in order to build new and stronger relationships.

The church’s life together is not a form of communism. Communism is a political ideology forced from the top down; it is designed to be a permanent status, and it is motivated by economics. But the communal life of the church is always voluntary, always impermanent, and always motivated by love. It is the sharing of “ordinary things”—hard times, good times, meals, prayers, and worship. We wait together, we pray together, and we work together, for the Lord and for His Kingdom.

The Bible refers to “fellowship” as the local company of believers and as the meals they shared together, but mostly as communion with God (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit)—not just the ceremony we call Holy Communion (though that is why it is so named), but *actual* communion—personal connection to God through faith or to His presence by experience.

John expresses “fellowship with God” as a given fact, based on our faith in Jesus Christ, by which he means that God is always close to those who have entrusted themselves to His Son—always attentive, always listening, always responding, guiding, and providing. This is especially good to know for those times when our feelings would discourage us; we can retake the hilltop by an act of faith, putting our trust in this gracious fact of fellowship with God.

Paul, rather, focuses on “fellowship with the Holy Spirit,” as a tangible nearness (the presence of God), especially known when we are together to worship and pray.

This brings us, once again, to that simple, yet beautiful benediction given by Paul as the conclusion of his second letter to the Corinthians, which shall also be my conclusion this morning: *“May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.”* (2 Corinthians 13:14)

Let’s prepare to pray.

Perhaps, today, you need to rely on the fellowship with God that Jesus Christ crafted for us by His own fellowship with the Father, and His substitutionary sacrifice for us. On the wings of His faithfulness, let us rise to the loving arms of God and receive His grace and love again today. Perhaps even for the first time. Simply accept Christ’s work as the necessary means to provide you with access to God’s heart and will. Accept the availability of God’s fellowship as a fact on which you can depend.

Maybe you need to feel God’s love for you today, down into your bones. Come and wait before Him here and receive prayer from a brother or sister. Or make the call when you’re at home and pray together over the phone. Just PUSH—Pray Until Something Happens.

Then, we will all be able to go from here to build stronger fellowship with each other by taking charge of your thoughts and acting in love, forgiving all those who may hurt you, cooperating with others, and showing generous hospitality. Make this your pledge, with God’s help, today.