

## CHAPTER TWO

# FELLOWSHIP REDISCOVERED

JOHN LOFTNESS

In the heart of Charleston, South Carolina stands an old church building. Bright stained glass offsets the solemnity of heavy red brick. Inside, pictures of Jesus and other biblical figures etched in glass filter the light of the worship place. A handcarved altar piece reaches to the vaulted ceiling. Someone gave great attention to detail in designing and building this house of worship. Above the entrance, inlaid in the brick, is a cross—the symbol and heart of Christendom for 2,000 years.

But times have changed, and the need for a house of worship has been replaced in Charleston’s tourist district by the need for prime restaurant space. So today the former

Church of the Redeemer has been transformed into the Mesa Grill. The church’s name, carved in a marble placard at the sidewalk entrance, looks as if someone has tried to sand-blast it away. In the glass case that once announced activities and the weekly sermon, there now hangs today’s menu. Where hardwood pews once filled the worship space, upholstered booths sit among potted plants. Rock music pulsates through the atmosphere; Sting has replaced Handel as nachos have replaced communion bread. None of the patrons seem particularly aware of the incongruity of the place.

**1** Before you read further, write a definition of biblical fellowship in the space below using your own words.

### Rediscovering Biblical Fellowship

As the title of this chapter announces, this is an essay about fellowship, and the Mesa Grill is an apt metaphor

**For Further Study:**

The Jewish Sabbath also went through a drastic change in meaning. Note the command to keep the Sabbath holy (Exodus 20:8-10). Now, see how the Jews applied that in Mark 3:1-6. Is this what God intended?

for what has happened to the practice of Christian relationship in the church today. We've kept the term and turned it into something that doesn't even vaguely represent what it means to the one who defined it.

Fellowship is like that old church building. People have started using the term to describe ways of relating never intended for this precious communion of the saints. And because God created the practice, we'd better make sure we use it in the way he designed it—because God isn't putting fellowship up for sale. Remember what happened when Jesus found the Temple being used as a place to turn a profit?

**What fellowship is not.** In its neglect, Christians have redefined fellowship to mean any warm human interchange—especially when we make connection with someone and discover that we have common interests, experiences, or viewpoints. I enjoy the outdoors. Hiking, canoeing, and fishing are among my favorite leisure activities. When I meet someone who knows the joys of the Rose River Trail in Shenandoah National Park, or has canoed the rapids of the lower Youghegheny River, or thrills at the first yank of the line signaling the strike of a smallmouth bass, our conversation is inevitably animated and friendly. But it is not fellowship.

If I spend time with a brother in Christ playing volleyball, talking about shared political views, or following the ups and downs of an NFL franchise, we may have a wonderful time and deepen a friendship. But in none of those things will we have had fellowship.

Let me press the point further. Fellowship is not (at least not necessarily) going to a Bible study with someone, or sharing doctrinal commitments, or attending a Christian men's rally where emotions run deep and passions are high. Fellowship is not found in a "group therapy" session where participants reveal their darkest thoughts—even if everyone in the group is a Christian and brings a Bible. In fact, two Christians can be married to one another and still not experience fellowship.

I have heard Christians complain that their relationships seem superficial and they don't know why. What they often fail to see is that, while all Christians have relationships, not all relationships include fellowship. In fellowship, God offers us a precious but neglected gift—a type of human relationship created exclusively for his children. If God thinks it's that important, we had better find out what it is.

**For Further Study:**

Even if you have neglected biblical fellowship, God can restore what you have lost—a principal seen in Joel 2:25.

**What fellowship is.** Fellowship is a uniquely Christian relational experience. No one but those born of the Spirit of God can have fellowship—which makes its neglect all the more tragic.

The word “fellowship,” as it is found in the English Bible, is a translation of the Greek word *koinonia*. Saying the word aloud brings to mind our word “community,” and so it should, for *koinonia* is its root. But sadly, politicians and sociologists have effectively redefined “community” to mean “special-interest group,” so we need additional words to get at its meaning. Here the Revised Standard Version of the Scriptures can help. It translates *koinonia* as “fellowship,” but also as “participation,” and “sharing” (in the following verses, these words are italicized for emphasis).

And they devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and *fellowship*, to the breaking of bread and the prayers (Ac 2:42).

So if there is any encouragement in Christ, any incentive of love, any *participation* in the Spirit, any affection and sympathy... (Php 2:1).

...and I pray that the *sharing* of your faith may promote the knowledge of all the good that is ours in Christ (Phm 1:6).

What is fellowship as defined in the New Testament? Just this: participating together in the life and truth made possible by the Holy Spirit through our union with Christ. Fellowship is sharing something in common on the deepest possible level of human relationship—our experience of God himself.

*Participating together...  
life and truth...sharing in*

*common...human relationship...experience of God*—these phrases capture the essence of the unique Christian experience of fellowship. Opportunities to fall in love, get mar-

**MEMORABLE MOMENTS  
IN SMALL-GROUP HISTORY**

A last-minute phone call informed me our musician couldn’t attend the small-group meeting that evening. I grabbed a CD of worship songs as we went out the door to go to the meeting.

When I put on the CD, soft music drew some people directly into worship. Their eyes closed, they lifted their hands, expressing tender love toward God. Others, however, were breaking into fits of laughter. I thought the Holy Spirit had fallen on the group. But the musical interlude was way too long. It suddenly dawned on me that at home we’d mixed up our CDs and cases, and that for the past few minutes some of us had been worshiping to *John Tesh Live At Red Rocks*.

— **Mario Stemberger (Holly Hill, FL)**

ried, procreate, pursue a career, go bungee jumping, play baseball, or go to school are all open to humanity in general. But only Christians can experience fellowship. For this reason alone, this unique quality of Christian existence should be exceedingly precious to us. We should eagerly explore its meaning so that we can fully mine its treasure. My sincere hope is that this chapter will compel you to seek a deeper experience of fellowship.

## Start with God

Fellowship with God is the prerequisite to fellowship with others. This is the explicit message of John in his first biblical letter:

We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard, so that you also may have fellowship with us. And our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ....If we claim to have fellowship with him yet walk in the darkness, we lie and do not live by 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, purifies us from all sin (1Jn 1:3, 6-7).

The flow of John's argument may not be as straightforward as modern readers prefer, but his logic is clear. John

“ [Fellowship is] a sharing with our fellow-believers the things that God has made known to us about himself, in hope that we may thus help them to know him better and so enrich their fellowship with him.

...Fellowship is, secondly, a seeking to share what God has made known of himself to others, as a means to finding strength, refreshment, and instruction for one's own soul.<sup>1</sup>

”

— J.I. Packer

and his fellow teachers ( the “we” of the passage) have come to know truth through the life and teaching of Jesus. This has allowed them to have fellowship with God the Father and with the ascended Christ. This fellowship exists not only *with* God but *between* and *among* those who “live by the truth.” Sin (“walking in darkness”) not only pollutes our fellowship with God but hinders our fellowship with one another.

“Walking in the light”—obeying God's word and confessing our sins when we disobey—should result in fellowship.

In short, fellowship with others begins with an honest, open, obedient relationship with God rooted in the truth of his Word. *How we share that relationship with oth-*

**For Further Study:**

Read Psalm 15:1-2; 51:6. How important are honesty and truthfulness to maintaining a right relationship with God?

*ers—how we wrestle with understanding truth and struggle to apply it to our lives—is the essence of fellowship.*

Thus, fellowship has one source and two channels. The one source is God. The two channels—both to be understood in the light of Scripture—are the work of the Spirit directly in our hearts, and the work of the Spirit through other believers.

Some, upon hearing this, might be tempted to get off the bus that takes them to fellowship. Relationships, even between believers, come packaged with problems. To pursue relationships is to open ourselves to hurt, misunderstanding, and inconvenience, for our relationships are inevitably influenced by our sin.

You may think fellowship with God is all you need.

**2** Have you used any of these common techniques to try to “turn off” God’s voice?

- The Technical Foul: Presuming that God will never speak to you through anyone who is not at a specific level of maturity and holiness.
- The World’s Oldest Excuse (see Genesis 3:11-13): Presuming that, if several people are involved in some sin, then what you did is somehow less serious than if you had acted alone.
- The Jonah Method: Running away from God’s direction in your life because you think you might not like the outcome.
- The Peter Problem (see Mark 14:27-31,66-72): Placing more faith in what you say about your strengths than in what God says about your weaknesses.

After all, doesn’t the Bible teach that God and his Word are sufficient for all our needs pertaining to life and godliness? Yes, it does. But the error comes in limiting the means God uses to help us apply truth to our lives. Only the Spirit can illuminate Scripture to our minds and give us the power to obey it. *Yet the Spirit often chooses to employ other people as a means of communicating his truth to our ears and heart.* Who are we to argue with him? He will of course use teachers of the word through sermons, books, and tapes. But he will also use the regular guy in your small group—and there’s the rub. We can ignore teachers, close books, and turn off tapes. When we do pay attention, we can conveniently misapply teachings. But the people closest to us, if they’re doing their job in fellowship, are not likely to let us ignore God’s urgings so easily.

**Meditate on Romans**

**12:5.** What does it mean to belong to one another?

We’re like the Israelites trudging through the wilderness, like the disciples huddled in the upper room after Jesus’ ascension, like the pilgrims on the Mayflower. The negative view is that we’re stuck with one another—confined by a desert, a hostile Jerusalem, or a stormy sea. But “stuck” is not the biblical attitude. Rather, we *belong* to one another. We are pilgrims on our way to the promised land, called to help one another along on the journey. God has chosen fellowship to be a primary channel of life in his body.

## The Means of Fellowship

Ever heard the phrase “a means of grace”? In theology, it refers to things we can do—such as pray or meditate on Scripture—to put ourselves in a position to receive something from God. Fellowship is a means of grace, too. It’s a

“ Those first Christians of Acts 2 were not devoting themselves to social activities but to a relationship—a relationship that consisted of sharing together the very life of God through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. They understood that they had entered this relationship by faith in Jesus Christ, not by joining an organization. And they realized that their fellowship with God logically brought them into fellowship with one another. Through their union with Christ they were formed into a spiritually organic *community*.... We must grasp the idea that fellowship means belonging to one another in the Body of Christ, along with all the privileges and responsibilities that such a relationship entails.<sup>2</sup> ”

— Jerry Bridges

way of getting to a place where God will meet us. So the next question is: what are the means of *fellowship*? What can we do to posture ourselves to experience fellowship? The list is long.

### **Worship God together.**

Worship is a means of experiencing fellowship with God through meditating upon and declaring truth about him, giving thanks to him, and receiving a sense of his presence. As we noted earlier from Scripture, fellowship with God—including worship—opens us to fellowship with one another.

**Pray for one another,** especially regarding the things that burden us and

how God is at work in our lives. Praying together is about as close as we can get to experiencing someone else’s fellowship with God and knowing the qualities of his relationship with his Lord.

**Utilize our spiritual gifts** to help others grow in God. If fellowship is participating together in the Spirit, what more obvious participation can there be than to serve one another through those grace-gifts empowered by the Spirit?

**Carry one another’s burdens.** Paul puts it this way: “Brothers, if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently. But watch yourself, or you also may be tempted. Carry each other’s burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ” (Gal 6:1-2). We all have burdens and—as I once heard my pastor, C.J. Mahaney, say—we have a responsibility to communicate those burdens without requiring anyone to receive divine revelation in order to know what they are. But this process does not have to be difficult.

### HOUSE RULES FOR GOD'S FAMILY

1. Be at peace with each other (Mk 9:50)
2. Love one another (Jn 13:34)
3. Be joined to one another (Ro 12:5)
4. Be devoted to one another (Ro 12:10)
5. Honor one another (Ro 12:10)
6. Rejoice with one another (Ro 12:15)
7. Weep with one another (Ro 12:15)
8. Live in harmony with one another (Ro 12:16)
9. Accept one another (Ro 15:7)
10. Counsel one another (Ro 15:14)
11. Greet one another (Ro 16:16)
12. Agree with each other (1 Co 1:10)
13. Wait for one another (1Co 11:33)
14. Care for one another (1Co 12:25)
15. Serve one another (Gal 5:13)
16. Carry one another's burdens (Gal 6:2)
17. Be kind to one another (Eph 4:32)
18. Forgive one another (Eph 4:32)
19. Submit to one another (Eph 5:21)
20. Bear with one another (Col 3:13)
21. Teach, admonish each other (Col 3:16)
22. Encourage one another (1Th 5:11)
23. Build up one another (1Th 5:11)
24. Spur one another on (Heb 10:24)
25. Offer hospitality to one another (1Pe 4:9)
26. Minister gifts to one another (1Pe 4:10)
27. Be humble toward one another (1Pe 5:5)
28. Confess your sins to one another (Jas 5:16)
29. Pray for one another (Jas 5:16)
30. Fellowship with one another (1Jn 1:7)

One day I was sitting in a church office as four of us on staff concluded a business meeting. As we got up to leave, I simply said, "I need to let you guys know what is going on in my heart." That's all it took to get the process underway.

Less than a month earlier we had buried an eight-year-old boy who had died of cancer. Matt had been more than a church member; he was a friend to me and my family. I had been feeling a heaviness—a sadness—since then, and I wasn't sure its source was pure, or that I was handling it correctly. Though it seems obvious now, I couldn't tell what was going on in my heart.

My friends listened quietly as I groped to explain myself. But they didn't just comfort me. They asked probing questions surrounding issues of self-pity, worry, and a prideful sense of responsibility. It took courage to ask such questions of someone struggling with the sadness I faced, but those questions needed asking, and I didn't know enough at the time to ask them of myself.

When my friends were done, I knew someone understood me—and not just in an emotional sense. They had helped me explore my soul. Their counsel?

Watch out for certain temptations, but mainly, you're grieving, John. The sadness you feel is a normal part of the painful losses we experience in life.

**For Further Study:**

Read Job 2:11-13.

When we try to counsel or comfort someone, is it always best to get right to the point?

Did my sadness leave on that day? Did I walk out of that office on clouds of joy? No. But three other men were now carrying my burden, and I left with a much lighter load.

We need to communicate the burdens of our *trials*. Not just the external challenges of losing a job or enduring an illness, but the inner conflicts as well. We also need to communicate the burdens of our *fears*, which are often embarrassing but can rule our souls. What a tragedy when the burdens of Christians weigh them down because they neglected to receive help through fellowship!

**Share about our spiritual experiences.** Since she was in high school my wife Nancy has kept a journal of her times alone seeking God. It's not unusual for her to read to me from it, and I share the same sorts of things with her. It often just takes five minutes, but it's rich fellowship just the same.

**Confess our sins to one another**—before someone comes to confront us. This obvious source of help in conquering sin is often neglected because of our foolish pride. “Therefore confess your sins to one another,” James writes, “and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective” (Jas 5:16).

**Correct one another** when we see someone has failed to recognize and take responsibility for his sins. Paul writes that when we see a brother caught in a sin, we should point it out to him to help promote his restoration (Gal 6:1). As uncomfortable as this is, *it is fellowship*. And if we are at first unsuccessful in winning the errant brother, Jesus teaches us to widen the circle of fellowship to ensure the correction is accurate and the brother receives every chance to be won (Mt 18:15ff).

Correction (see Chapter Five) is one of the more challenging aspects of fellowship because it often entails disagreement and conflict. Moreover, the one bringing correction may end up having his own motives evaluated—and found wanting. Yet without this dynamic of fellowship, we wall up portions of our lives, blocking us from other opportunities for fellowship.

**Serve one another in practical ways.** Effective serving requires knowing another's needs. Discovering these needs is often the product of fellowship. Imagine that a couple in your group reveals that they are experiencing unusual conflict due to neglect of their marriage. Fellowship may mean taking their children for a weekend so the parents can get away and work on righting the wrongs of their relationship.



## LIVING IT OUT, TOGETHER

### *A Testimony*

When we first came to this church, we noticed how open the pastors were about their lives. We began visiting a small group and discovered that the leaders, Tom and Julie, were equally honest. So were the group members. In a discussion about suffering and God's sovereignty, we learned of the death of one couple's son. Bruce and I had been taught to ask God to supply our needs, but we had never heard how "suffering" fit into the Christian life. We were seeing biblical truth applied in people's lives, and we hungered for more.

Another time, I was struck by the humble way Julie asked the group for prayer about her struggles in a specific area.

The humility of the group members helps us receive their observations about our shortcomings. When Julie (privately and graciously) told me my older daughter had been disrespectful to her, I was embarrassed. Then Bruce and I realized the Lord was revealing an area where we had slacked off, so we became more consistent in training and disciplining our children.

Our group's humility, desire to change, and sincere willingness to help enable us to let down our guard and to share our needs, hurts, desires, and sins. Recently, due to financial and time pressures on top of a rough day of homeschooling, I called Julie in tears. She was so encouraging! Before coming to this church, I wouldn't have had the courage to ask a fellow church member for prayer and help in the middle of a difficult time!

We've learned that we cannot grow in the Lord without a strong church and strong Christian friends. When God's truth is revealed, we need flesh-and-blood people applying it and living it out with us!

— Laura Grabow (Darnestown, MD )

We must, however, beware of thinking that the mere act of doing of any of these things will automatically produce fellowship. Remember, these are "means of fellowship." They simply put you in a place where fellowship becomes *possible*, not certain. True fellowship is a work of the Spirit by grace. And as with the Tango: it takes two to fellowship, and not everyone wants to dance. Still, failure to practice these *means of fellowship* denies us the opportunity to draw on fellowship as a *means of grace*.

## Hindrances to Fellowship

In an essay on fellowship J.I. Packer identifies four hindrances to enjoying this particular dynamic of life in the Spirit: self-sufficiency, formality, bitterness, and elitism.<sup>3</sup>

**Self-sufficiency.** This sin announces to God and others that we are adequate in ourselves. It reveals itself in a lack of prayer (demonstrating our delusion that we don't need God) and a lack of fellowship (demonstrating our delusion that we don't need each other).

For the past 30 years Christians have been fascinated by 1 Corinthians 12 and the other New Testament passages about spiritual gifts. Often, the underlying

**For Further Study:**  
Read Isaiah 14:12-15.  
If only God is truly self-sufficient, what does our striving for self-sufficiency reveal?

question has been, “What are my gifts?” If our concern is for serving, this is a good question. But taking a broader view of the chapter reveals another issue: *We need each other*, for different people have different gifts. To say that we can become who God wants us to be without benefit of fellowship is as inaccurate as saying that a body can be fully functional without eyes or hands or ears.

In our self-sufficiency we tend to ignore fellowship—only to discover our need for it when we hit a crisis. Then we scramble to build relationships just when we have the least time for them, and when people—for good reason, given our history—have concluded we have no interest in fellowship.

**3** Do you have any habits or heart attitudes that keep you from growing in Christ through fellowship? How about these?

- Because of my heritage, I’m naturally stoic and reserved, so I tend to keep to myself.
- I tried that kind of fellowship once, and I gave a whole lot more than I got, so I tend to keep to myself.
- I was an only child, so I tend to keep to myself.
- My brothers and sisters were the ones always clamoring for attention, so I tend to keep to myself.
- Maybe I’ll go along with this fellowship stuff, as long as somebody else goes first.

**Formality.** The word can conjure images of debutante balls and trying to remember which fork to use. But here all it means is those rules and standards we unconsciously employ when we’re in social settings. Sometimes these rules are neutral, but sometimes they inhibit fellowship. Consider the unwritten code of some families: “You don’t talk about your ‘private’ life with other people.” You won’t produce much fellowship taking *that* belief into the church!

We can also fall into formality within our small groups—the very place where fellowship demands spontaneity and openness. In fact, I’ve found the meetings of many small groups to be as predictable as any liturgy (and I say this without any intent to denigrate congregations that employ a liturgy).

The leader follows a standard pattern. The same people pray, read Scripture, talk about their problems. Every time.

But fellowship is spiritual—“of the Spirit”—and so should our meetings be. The needs and issues of our lives change, and so should the content and topics of our meetings, for the Spirit is constantly at work in our lives to conform us to Christ’s image in specific ways. We must adapt to his work, and invite others to help us. I’m not advocating there be no plan or format to meetings, but rather, that the plans include opportunities for everyone to share the work of the Spirit in his or her life.

**Bitterness.** Bitterness in the context of fellowship is

simply a sinful reaction to something gone awry in a relationship. Consider these areas:

**For Further Study:**

Why did Joseph's brothers plot to kill him? What had gone wrong in their relationship? (see Genesis 37)

- Unfulfilled expectations: "I've invited him to lunch, and he didn't accept; I've opened my life to him and he didn't follow up; I thought we would become close friends, but instead he spends all his time with someone else."
- Offended pride: "Your correction was inaccurate, and I'm insulted that you'd even think I could do such a thing. I'll never open my life to you again."
- Jealousy: "Why is he the group leader? Can't the pastors see that I'm far more talented?"
- Gossip and slander. Telling someone privileged, negative information about another when the recipient is neither part of the problem nor part of the solution—this is gossip. Slander, which is the spreading of false information about someone with an intent to harm him or her, tempts those slandered to grow bitter. Left unconforted, gossip and slander create mistrust and bitterness, building a wall of hostility fellowship cannot scale. Worse yet, these sins tend to create factions within the group, which only separate believers further from one another.

**Elitism.** This condescending attitude toward those whom we deem less mature than ourselves quenches fellowship—or turns it into a narrow one-way street. We find elitism in this kind of thinking: "I can help him, but

“ The reprover should have a lion's stout heart, or he will not be faithful, and a lady's soft hand, or he is not like to be successful.<sup>4</sup>

— George Swinnock

he's not mature enough to make any contribution to *my* growth. I only share my life with people mature enough to handle my problems." Or we can form cliques rooted in the pride of tenure: "I've been here a long time and my relationships are established.

Those folks would probably be more comfortable with some of the newer members."

## Getting from Here to There

**Ask.** Once we are committed to the value of fellowship, creating opportunities for it is quite simple. Ask people questions that go beyond the superficial. Get past "How're

ya' doing?" to "How is God working in your life right now?" "How did that event affect you?" "What do you think you can learn from this?"

We seem to find it much harder to *ask* such questions than to answer them. Most of us desire to share our trials, burdens, successes and interests with others—all we lack is a brother or sister with a willing ear.

**Volunteer.** Fellowship flows when we volunteer information about our internal state to others *not simply to relieve the problem of loneliness, but to gain their honest evaluation of how we are dealing with the issue and how we can change.* Correction is rarely given unless we invite it. Recently a friend asked to speak to me privately. He was struggling with temptation toward a besetting sin, and his appeal was memorable: "I appreciate your support when I confess my trial and sinful reaction, but I need more than your understanding and support. I need you to rebuke me in *strong terms*. Please get my attention by correcting me in strength." This man enjoys deep fellowship, and his growth in God has been consistent partly because he recognizes his need for help, and he knows the Spirit uses others to provide insight.

**Take advantage of ready-made opportunities.** I prepare for my small group with two things in mind: first, what issue in my life is God bringing to my attention—a sin or temptation, a trial, an opportunity or decision, confusion over some issue. I come ready and willing to open my life and receive input on this issue. As a practical matter, we can't always get to everyone, so we may not cover my issue that evening, but I'm ready if we do. (And if we don't, I look for other opportunities.) Second, I approach the meeting recalling past issues others have brought up so I can express my care and encourage fellowship by following up.

My group meets in two settings: as couples (all of us are married), and separately as groups of men and women. We use discernment as to which issues are appropriate for the mixed group and which demand discretion.

**Be creative.** Other opportunities for fellowship abound. Hospitality is a biblical practice that fosters fellowship. Conversation tends to flow freely during a meal, whether it's in someone's kitchen or at a restaurant. Parties can also help create fellowship—if we make room for it.

Go camping together. Room near each other at the church retreat. Any contact between Christians—especially those in your own church, and most especially those in your small groups—should be seen as an opportunity for fellowship.

**For Further Study:**

Read Titus 1:12-13.

What motivated Paul to use strong correction in specific cases?

**For Further Study:**

Read Romans 12:13

and 1 Peter 4:9. Is

hospitality recommended, or commanded?

## All in the Family

One of the metaphors by which Scripture describes the church is the family. There is much concern today about the family. Society as a whole has been alarmed to discover that individual families, and even the institution of the family, grow weak if they are not nurtured (the trendy term is “dysfunctional”). With all the discussion of such families, one might conclude they are the only kind left.

But that’s far from true. There are lots of healthy, “functional” families. Of these, I’m convinced the best ones are found in biblically based Christian homes that have their roots planted deep in the soil of the local church.

The Biblical word for family is usually translated

“household,” and when we become Christians, we become members of God’s household, his family. Look at three passages from Paul:

Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers (Gal 6:10).

Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow citizens with God’s people and members of God’s household (Eph 2:19).

If I am delayed, you will know how people ought to conduct themselves in God’s household, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and foundation of the truth (1Ti 3:15).

**4** Think of the best family you have ever known. Now, write down three things about that family that made it so good.

1)

2)

3)

Are there truths here that can be applied to your church?

Each of us has family responsibilities in the church. Fellowship encompasses a major responsibility to care for another’s soul and to get help for our own so that together we can be all that God intends us to be.

A good local church—and a good small group—is like the best of families. Good families take responsibility for each other. Good families are honest with each other. Good families take care of each other. Good families deal with their problems. Good families love each other—no one is lonely. Good families love and respect the head of the household—in our case the one we call Father and Lord.

Fellowship makes family life possible in the church.

But fellowship doesn't happen of itself. We must define it, we must pursue it, we must love it. If we do, we will prevent someone from turning our spiritual household into a restaurant. ■

- GROUP DISCUSSION**
1. Read the definition of fellowship you wrote in answer to Question 1 on page 17. Do you still think that's the best definition? Why or why not?
  2. Can you name an activity you once believed to be fellowship, but which actually is not?
  3. Which spiritual gifts do you think you may possess? (see Romans 12) How might these promote fellowship in your small group?
  4. Do the members of your small group know about any of the spiritual experiences that have made the greatest impact in your life?
  5. Self-sufficiency, formality, bitterness, elitism: Do these categories suggest any areas of sin you may need to confess? Invite the evaluation of others.
  6. Take a poll. Do most people in your small group find it easier to *answer* a question about their spiritual life than to *ask* such a question of someone else?
  7. If the answer to Question 6 is yes, then go ahead and ask someone about his or her spiritual life—because most people won't mind answering!
  8. Pray that God would help you have the humility and passion to seize future opportunities for fellowship.

**RECOMMENDED READING** *The Crisis of Caring* by Jerry Bridges (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1985)

#### NOTES

1. J.I. Packer, *God's Words* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1981).
2. Jerry Bridges, *True Fellowship* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 1985), p. 16-17.
3. J.I. Packer, *God's Words*, p. 198-199.
4. George Swinnock, *The Golden Treasury of Puritan Quotations* (Carlisle, PA: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1989) p. 245.