

FELLOWSHIP OF ONE FAMILY*

The first 120 disciples of Christ in Jerusalem were filled with the same and singular passion – Jesus. They were so consumed with the love of their Savior and couldn't help but to love one another and share everything with one another. Nothing was important to them anymore except Jesus and knowing Him. Possessions that were once the pride of life were now offered for the common good of anyone among them who had need. No one considered themselves better than anyone else because Jesus had died for them all. They assembled to worship Jesus and they ate common meals together, enjoying one another's company, praying together, praising God, and sharing communion.

Even before the Holy Spirit was poured out, they were completely and totally devoted to obeying Christ's commands. Men and women alike were now all of one mind and considered equal as followers Jesus.

*Acts 1:14 KJV: These all continued **with one accord in prayer and supplication**, with the women, and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with his brethren.*

The word for *one accord* in Greek is a combination of two words which mean to *rush along* and *in unison*. It is used to describe groups of people who agree unanimously about what is true and what needs to be done. It is reminiscent of a great harmony, like a symphony of many different instruments coming together to play a composed melody at the direction of a common conductor.

After Pentecost, because the Holy Spirit had been poured out, this natural devotion was raised to a supernatural dimension as 3,120 people were of *one accord*, sharing the same heart and mind. As the Holy Spirit circumcised their hearts in selflessness, they were compelled to share everything that they owned so that everyone had what they needed.

*Acts 2:42-47: They **devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer**. Everyone was filled with awe at the many wonders and signs performed by the apostles. **All the believers were together and had everything in common**. They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need. **Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God** and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.*

*Acts 4:32-35: **All the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of their possessions was their own, but they shared everything they had**. With great power the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus. And **God's grace was so powerfully at work in them all that there were no needy persons among them. For from time to time those who owned land or houses sold them, brought the money from the sales and put it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to anyone who had need**.*

This type of community was a living demonstration of what God had always intended for society. When God created Adam & Eve and told them to fill the earth with their family, this is what He had in mind.

GOD'S DESIGN FOR COMMUNITY

When God gave His Law to the people of Israel, He articulated His will for His people towards one another. God's Laws clearly outlined His views for restitution for stolen property, moved landmarks, fair treatment of slaves, dealing with a neighbor's stray animal, not pretending that you did not witness a crime, testifying

truthfully, deceitful seduction, betrayal, family inheritance, and a whole host of other issues that the people daily faced in their dealings with one another. God's Laws for social responsibility, equity, fairness, and the administration of justice placed higher value on human life, dignity, and care for creation than any other society in history ever had. Because God is the One who created every person and everything, His statutes and precepts reveal His love for all He created and His desire for harmony and peace.

Moreover, the purpose of implementing God's Laws was to demonstrate His goodness towards His people and then, as His people lived in accordance with His Laws, their kindness towards one another would reveal God's love through them to the whole world.

*Deuteronomy 4:6-8: Observe them carefully, for **this will show your wisdom and understanding to the nations**, who will hear about all these decrees and say, "Surely **this great nation is a wise and understanding people.**" What other nation is so great as to have their gods near them the way the LORD our God is near us whenever we pray to him? **And what other nation is so great as to have such righteous decrees and laws as this body of laws I am setting before you today?***

*Psalms 67:1-2: May God be gracious to us and bless us and make his face shine on us-- **so that your ways may be known on earth, your salvation among all nations.***

Notably, God's statutes for His people towards one another are slightly different from the rules for His people towards non-Israelites. Through God's Law, Israelites were instructed to lend freely to their fellow Jews with an open hand, without charging interest, without a tight fist, and without a grudge in their hearts. (See Exodus 22:25; Leviticus 25:36.) God also made provision for the poor, the orphan, and the widow who could not provide for themselves, and demanded fair treatment of the foreigner residing among the Israelites. In fact, foreigners in Israel were never to be abused, mistreated, or oppressed but welcomed and included whenever possible.

*Deuteronomy 23:19-20: **Do not charge a fellow Israelite interest**, whether on money or food or anything else that may earn interest. **You may charge a foreigner interest, but not a fellow Israelite**, so that the LORD your God may bless you in everything you put your hand to in the land you are entering to possess.*

*Deuteronomy 15:4, 7-8, 10-11: However, **there need be no poor people among you**, for in the land the LORD your God is giving you to possess as your inheritance, he will richly bless you, ... **If anyone is poor among your fellow Israelites** in any of the towns of the land the LORD your God is giving you, **do not be hardhearted or tightfisted toward them. Rather, be openhanded and freely lend them whatever they need... Give generously to them and do so without a grudging heart;** then because of this the LORD your God will bless you in all your work and in everything you put your hand to. There will always be poor people in the land. Therefore I command you to **be openhanded toward your fellow Israelites who are poor and needy in your land.***

*Leviticus 23:22: When you reap the harvest of your land, do not reap to the very **edges of your field or gather the gleanings of your harvest. Leave them for the poor and for the foreigner residing among you.** I am the LORD your God. (See also Exodus 23:9; Leviticus 19:9-10; Deuteronomy 24:18-20, 14:29.)*

All of this is to say that after the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost, Christians began to organically and genuinely align their lives with God's original design for community. They considered themselves to be brothers and sisters in the family of God and they depended on one another for the things they needed. This was particularly true because many of them gave up everything in order to follow Christ or had been disowned by their families for worshipping Jesus. Therefore, they shared everything that they had with each other so that every believer had what they needed. They placed high priority on taking care of fellow believers so that there would be no lack among them.

1 John 3:16-18: This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. **And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers and sisters. [fellow believers] If anyone has material possessions and sees a brother or sister in need but has no pity on them, how can the love of God be in that person?** Dear children, let us not love with words or speech but with actions and in truth.

James 2:14-16: What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if someone claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save them? **Suppose a brother or a sister [fellow believer] is without clothes and daily food. If one of you says to them, "Go in peace; keep warm and well fed," but does nothing about their physical needs, what good is it?**

1 John 4:19-21: **We love because he first loved us. Whoever claims to love God yet hates a brother or sister [fellow believer] is a liar.** For whoever does not love their brother and sister, whom they have seen, cannot love God, whom they have not seen. **And he has given us this command: Anyone who loves God must also love their brother and sister. [fellow believer]**

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

The word most often used in the New Testament to address the people of the Church, is *brethren* which is also translated *brothers and sisters*. This word indicates people who came out of the same womb and signifies people of the same bloodline, ancestor, or people group. We as believers come out of the same womb (the tomb of Christ) into the family of God through the blood of Jesus. This connects us to one another in a profoundly significant and eternal bond. We are family.

In fact, Jesus acknowledged the bond of spiritual family as deeper and more significant than the bond of natural family. As His ministry progressed, His own family thought He had lost His mind and did not believe Him. (See Mark 3:21; John 7:5.) Although He made provision for the care of His mother before His death, Jesus publicly elevated the role of His disciples as His family over that of biological family.

Mark 3:33-35: **"Who are my mother and my brothers?"** he asked. Then he looked at those seated in a circle around him and said, **"Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does God's will is my brother and sister and mother."**

The people God has selected to be His are our family for eternity. Like any good father, it is our Father's desire for us to get along with one another as His sons and daughters and to share with one another, help each other, and resolve conflicts with one another as brothers and sisters in the same family.

KOINONIA - FELLOWSHIP

Christian fellowship is an expression of our oneness and family bond. The word for fellowship in Greek is *koinonia* which means *association or community* describing joint participation or partnership. Each member is an essential piece of the whole. It can also mean *communion, intercourse, and intimacy* which clearly indicate that the magnitude of *koinonia* is not just casual getting together over pot-luck dinners and pleasant conversation. Rather, we are one body which is not whole if a single piece is missing.

Romans 12:4-5: For just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, so in Christ we, though many, **form one body, and each member belongs to all the others.**

1 Corinthians 12:4-6, 12, 27: There are different kinds of gifts, but **the same Spirit** distributes them. There are different kinds of service, but **the same Lord**. There are different kinds of working, but in all of them and in everyone it is **the same God** at work... **Just as a body, though one, has many parts, but all its many parts form one body, so it is with Christ...** Now **you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it.**

Ephesians 4:4-6: **There is one body and one Spirit**, just as you were called to **one hope** when you were called; **one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all**, who is over all and through all and in all.

In Christ we have become one. We all have the same heart – the Holy Spirit; the same King – Jesus; and the same Father – God. This oneness is so important that Jesus passionately prayed for us as believers function in unity with one another. This harmony among us is one of the ways by which those who do not know Christ as their Savior may be drawn in to know Him.

*John 17:20-23: "My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, **that all of them may be one**, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us **so that the world may believe that you have sent me**. I have given them the glory that you gave me, **that they may be one as we are one-- I in them and you in me--so that they may be brought to complete unity. Then the world will know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.***

God's intent for the Church is for all of His people to be unified as ONE body so that we are a living, breathing, walking, talking demonstration of God's nature of giving, serving, and loving. Through our self-sacrificing participation and partnership with one another, we reveal that we are different than the self-serving world and its competitive ways.

This is not just a dream. This happened in the earliest days of the Church as the Gospel message spread to new territories and Christian communities were formed. Even today, the oneness of Christians is more profound than any other bond in the world. We do not just share intellectual beliefs and a common book. We have a bond with one another that is deeper than flesh and blood, more powerful than family heritage, and which far surpasses any natural form of partnership or association. In Christ, we are one.

GATHERING TOGETHER

In the earliest days of the Church, worshippers of Jesus gathered together as a new faith, a new family, and a new people of God and God continually added to their numbers. The word for gathering together is *synago*. It is the same word used to describe gathering fish into a net, collecting sheaves of harvest, or assembling for an important meeting. Christian gatherings are designed to be a preview of the ultimate eternal harvest celebration where the children of God rejoice in His goodness.

Believers opened their hearts and the homes to one another and for worshipping Jesus. This is because in those days, there were no church buildings. In fact, there were no church buildings for the first three hundred years of Christianity and because of heavy persecution, believers often had to meet in secret.

When they gathered together, they would pray, fast, seek the will of the Lord, function in their spiritual gifts, and share communion. In their flow of service, any and every believer was welcome to share what the Holy Spirit was revealing to them.

*1Corinthians 12:7,11: Now **to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good**. ... All these are the work of one and the same Spirit, and **he distributes them to each one, just as he determines**.*

*1Corinthians 14:26,31: What then shall we say, brothers and sisters? When you come together, **each of you has a hymn, or a word of instruction, a revelation, a tongue or an interpretation...** For you can all prophesy in turn so that everyone may be instructed and encouraged.*

In the early years of Christianity, the Holy Spirit orchestrated the flow of Christian gatherings. Those with more knowledge of the Scriptures taught other believers and strengthened them in their knowledge of God. The Elders and Deacons in any given city were there to guard and guide the people in the ways of God and to serve the needs of the people as they arose in the course of life.

However, this changed drastically after Constantine became Emperor of Rome in 313 AD. Constantine professed to be a Christian because he believed that the God of the Christians gave him control of the Roman Empire. Overnight, Christianity went from being heavily persecuted (including throwing Christians to wild animals in the Colosseum for entertainment) to being the favored religion of the civilized world in that day. Home churches were forbidden and buildings which had been pagan temples became the meeting places for Christian meetings. Then, in keeping with the pagan temple customs, priests and leaders were appointed often through bribery or cronyism and were given titles like Father, Master, and Pope even though Jesus had specifically instructed His followers not to call anyone father or master except God alone, and not to let anyone call them father or master. The priests became the only ones with access to the holy books while the people had no Bibles of their own to read. The flow of service changed so that leaders gave dissertations and dictated to people what they needed to do while the people were expected to remain silent and submissive. Moreover, Constantine's zeal for political power mixed with his questionable profession of Christian faith diverted the focus of Christianity toward establishing a world empire for his benefit in the name of God rather than establishing the Kingdom of God in the hearts of the people. Christianity became paganized, a far cry from Jesus' life and teachings, and lacking any resemblance to the gatherings of the first disciples of Christ.

However even today, God continues to love each of us as His children individually and gift us in unique ways that contribute to the whole of what He is doing in the earth and in His Kingdom. When we gather together, it is still God's desire for us to be like a symphony conducted by Jesus with each instrument playing its part as empowered by the Holy Spirit.

GREATEST IS LOVE

All of us can function in the gifts God has given us in ways that contribute to the Body of Christ and encourage each other in our faith. This said, spiritual maturity is something much greater than flowing spiritual gifts. Both individually and corporately, maturity is love. (See 1 Corinthians 13.)

The earliest Christians were *cut to the heart* when they understood the love of God for them. To them, everything else seemed trivial by comparison. It was this revelation of the love of Jesus that made loving one another and sharing everything with one another so effortless. Jesus only gave one command to His disciples: to love one another as He loves us.

*John 15:12-14, 17: **My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you.** Greater love has no one than this: to **lay down one's life for one's friends.** You are my friends if you do what I command. ... **This is my command: Love each other.***

We cannot love one another unless we truly know the love of Jesus for ourselves. Loving and serving each other entails trusting God enough to lay aside our own agendas, preferences, ambitions, and needs in order to submit ourselves to God and to one another. This is how the world will see that we are a fellowship of the family of God.

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