

## How Does a New Testament Church Fellowship? Hebrews 10:23-25

Good morning! I hope you are all well. It's just the beginning of the year and we're all facing challenges already. Last week was a real challenge and, unfortunately, we had to cancel the service. Better safe than sorry. It was out of our control. I hope you took the time anyway to have a little service of your own at home like singing worship songs, having a devotion, or watching a service online. I was thinking that maybe next time we have a snowstorm, I'll just stream live my sermon. Tita Annie will also stream live her music. Kuya Rey will also stream live the tithes and offering. You will just have to click a button to give your tithes and offerings. There are two buttons. One says, "I'll send my tithe now". The other says, "Kuya Elvin will send my tithe now."

Well, anyway, I'm glad we're all back here. Say to your neighbor, "I'm glad to see you!" Say it like you mean it.

We're in this series called "Becoming Like a New Testament Church". I mentioned that for this year, I want us to focus on becoming like a church that impacts and influences others for Jesus. Last week, I said that to start this process, we need to be a balanced church, a church that puts equal emphasis on the five purposes of the church which we learned from Rick Warren, pastor of Saddleback Church. These are Worship, Fellowship, Discipleship, Service, and Evangelism. I started with worship last week because that's where it all really starts. God is first and we must put God first in our lives. In the end of my message, I encouraged everyone to draw near to God. It is by drawing near to God that we're able to draw others to God. Like the Samaritan woman at the well.

Today, I'd like to talk about "How a New Testament Church Fellowship". Let us read the passage on the screen. (Hebrews 10:23-25)

I'd like to share with you some characteristics and aspects of fellowship that were true of the early church which we can and should expect of our own fellowship. So, get your notebooks and get ready to jot down some important points. This sermon may be a little longer than usual to make up for the lost Sunday. ☺

There was a young woman, Linda, who was traveling alone up the rutted and rugged highway from Alberta, Canada to the Yukon. Linda didn't know you don't travel to Whitehorse alone in a rundown Honda Civic, so she set off where only four-wheel drivers normally venture. The first evening she found a room in the mountains near a summit and asked for a 5 a.m. wakeup call so she could get an early start. She couldn't understand why the clerk looked surprised at that request, but as she awoke to early morning fog shrouding the mountain-tops, she understood.

Not wanting to look foolish, she got up and went to breakfast. Two truckers invited Linda to join them, and since the place was so small, she felt obliged. "Where are you headed?" one of the truckers asked. "Whitehorse" was her reply. "In that little Civic? No way! This pass is DANGEROUS in weather like this."

"Well, I'm determined to try" was Linda's gutsy, if not very uninformed response.

"Then I guess we're just going to have to hug you," the trucker suggested. Linda drew back. "There's no way I'm going to let you touch me!"

"Not like THAT!" the truckers chuckled. "We'll put one truck in front of you and one in the rear. In that way, we'll get you through the mountains."

All that foggy morning Linda followed the two red dots in front of her and had the reassurance of a big escort behind as they made their way safely through the mountains.

That story reminds me of what this church is supposed to be like. Caught in the fog of our dangerous passage through life, we need to be “hugged”. With fellow Christians who know the way and can safely lead ahead of us, and with others behind, gently encouraging us along, that we, too, may pass safely.

Today, as I said, we come to the second purpose of the church which is Fellowship. This afternoon I’d like to tackle these questions on fellowship. What is Fellowship? What’s the Basis of Our Fellowship? What breaks fellowship? What strengthens fellowship?

## I. WHAT IS FELLOWSHIP?

You know, we tend to use the term very loosely. We call it "fellowship" every time we get together, as long as there's either food or coffee involved. Some churches will have a "fellowship hour" before the Sunday service, so people can come a little early and sip coffee and eat and socialize. Or they'll advertise a church picnic with the slogan, "fun, food, and fellowship!" Sounds like us. Here in our church after service, we call our lunch together as meal fellowship. Nothing wrong with that.

But Christian fellowship is not just socializing. You see, “Fellowship” is a translation of the Greek word “**Koinonia**” used in the New Testament. By the way, last year, the winning word in the National Spelling Bee Contest is that word, “Koinonia”. I would have won!

Anyway, Koinonia gives the idea of sharing a portion of your life with someone else. Sharing needs, hurts, joys, laughter, tears, stories – everything that makes up the everyday existence of your life. Now, “koinonia” is used also in the sense that it has the specific purpose of helping one another; encouraging one another to persevere in the faith.

If a group of Christians are talking about the weather, or about politics, or about the Wizards or the Redskins, it may be enjoyable, and there's nothing wrong with it, but it's not fellowship in the real sense of the word. Our text says, "***let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds***"

Do we do that? Do we "consider" how to encourage others in the church toward love and good deeds? People think that's the pastor's job, and it is, but it's your job too. Note also that the opposite of "not meeting" is encouraging one another. The Hebrews writer assumes that if they are meeting together, that one of the things happening is mutual encouragement.

How can we encourage one another? Let me give you a tip from Ephesians. "***Don't say anything that would hurt another person. Instead, speak only what is good so that you can give help wherever it is needed. That way, what you say will help those who hear you.***" (Eph. 4:29 GW)

The author of Hebrews wrote to believers who were facing persecution at the time. He tells them to stand firm, to "hold unswervingly" to their faith in Jesus Christ. And how were they to accomplish that? How were they to stand their ground, when a hostile government was throwing them in jail, and confiscating their property; when they were facing the real possibility of shedding blood for their faith?

Here's what he tells them: "spur one another on toward love and good deeds." Meet together, and "encourage one another." In short, to fellowship together. Do you understand what he's saying?

This isn't just polite conversation about the weather or the Wizards. This is a community of Christians involved in a life-and-death struggle to hold on to their faith, a group of people who are trying to encourage each other to hang in there and not go back to the world! And that's why we need fellowship. Not just to make our Sunday mornings pleasant and enjoyable. Although that is surely welcome.

But to give us the strength to persevere in the faith, in the face of persecution or not. Because we know life is hard and everyone needs encouragement. We are to hug one another. Both literally and figuratively.

Let me ask you a question: who guarantees that once we place our faith in Christ, we never fall away, never abandon the faith? Whose power is it that holds us in union with Christ? Is it your power? Is it mine? No. It's God's power that keeps us in the faith:

*"I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one can snatch them out of my hand. My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all; no one can snatch them out of my Father's hand."* – John 10:28-29 (NIV)

*"Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to His great mercy has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to obtain an inheritance which is imperishable and undefiled and will not fade away, reserved in heaven for you, who are protected by the power of God through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time."* – 1 Peter 1:3-5 (NASB)

Now, if that's true, and it is, then why the big fuss about encouraging one another? Won't God see to it that we persevere? Yes, He will. But this is how He does it; through us, the body of Christ. That is why there are local churches like Fil-Am that are scattered around the world so that there's a place you can go to where you can be encouraged. God's grace comes to us through one another. His encouragement comes to us by the words that we speak to one another.

He refreshes us and renews our strength through the acts of kindness and mercy that we perform for one another. We are the channels through which God's power flows. So yes, it's true that we persevere by God's power. But that power comes to us through other believers. Amen? Say to your neighbor, "You've got the power of God!"

When you think about it that way, you begin to realize what an awesome responsibility God has placed in your hands. Whatever it is that Christine, or Kevin, or Kuya Rey, or Charlie needs from God, in order to keep believing and keep obeying, is going to come through the body of Christ, including the people in this room. It may be a word of encouragement; it may be a prayer; it may be reminding them of some truth they've temporarily forgotten. It may be just listening. But whatever it is they need, it has to come through us.

So, that's what fellowship means. Getting together in order to encourage one another because of things we have in common. Which brings us to the next question...

## II. WHAT IS THE BASIS OF OUR FELLOWSHIP?

As I mentioned, it is based on the fact that there are things we have in common. Eph 4:3-6 gives us the things that we have in common: *"Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. 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."*

This passage tells us the basis of our fellowship: GOD. He is the one who holds us together, who makes us one. He is the one who has given us all other things that make us one. The neat thing about the things mentioned in this passage is that none of them will ever change.

If I base my fellowship with you over the fact that we like the same basketball team, what happens if one of us changes our mind and starts to like another team? Or If I base my fellowship with you over the fact that we both like shopping, what happens when you don't have money to spend anymore? But if I base my fellowship with you over the fact that we both have Jesus – there I am safe, because that will never change!

Now, in the verse that we just read, Paul says, “Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit.” In other words, he’s saying, “It’s possible that your fellowship will break, so try your best to preserve it.” Which brings us to the next question:

### **III. WHAT BREAKS FELLOWSHIP?**

Paul himself had experienced breaking fellowship with another Christian. This was when he parted ways with his long-time companion Barnabas. They were going on a mission trip. Barnabas wanted to bring along Mark but Paul disagreed because Mark didn’t seem to be committed to their work. In fact, he deserted them. Well, Barnabas being the encourager that he was wanted to give Mark a second chance. Paul and Barnabas had a sharp disagreement about it. So, Paul left with Silas and Barnabas with Mark. (Acts 15:38-40)

Peter likewise broke fellowship with other Christians. This was when he went to Antioch. At first, he was friendly with his non-Jewish Christian friends, even eating together with them. But when some Jewish Christians came, he suddenly withdrew himself from his non-Jewish Christian friends. He was afraid to be seen with them. (Gal. 2:11-12)

Then, there’s the case also of the Corinthian Christians who were divided because of personalities. Some wanted to follow Apollos, some Paul, some Peter, some Christ. There were factions in that church. Their fellowship was breaking apart. (1 Cor. 1:11-12)

And, of course, we read in Philippians the famous case of these two women named Euodia and Synteche, who didn’t agree about something. Paul didn’t specify. I don’t know. Maybe they can’t agree who has the best-sounding name. (Phil. 4:2)

So, what breaks fellowship? Differences! They could be major like principles, doctrines, policies, or as small or simple as the name of a person or being ignored or being insulted. If in the New Testament it has happened, it's happening in our time as well. Every now and then we hear of church splits. Or we hear of a family leaving the church. Or of someone not coming to church anymore. Sometimes, break-ups occur because of a tiny difference. I heard of a church that became divided just because they couldn't agree on the color of the carpet in the sanctuary.

Paul talks about in 1 Cor 12 that each of us is different from one another. We have different gifts and abilities. I need to realize that I don't have to be just like you in order to fellowship with you. What enables us to fellowship with one another is the fact that we each use our differences to help one another, serve one another and carry the whole group in the same direction. That's why Paul calls us a body in that chapter. We're headed the same way. As a church, we have a purpose or mission statement because we want to get everyone headed in the same direction at the same time.

There are times, however, when it's necessary to break fellowship with someone. For example, if that person denies the fundamentals of the faith like the trinity or the virgin birth or if he has committed a sexual sin and wouldn't repent of it. Paul handled a case in Corinth in which a man slept with his stepmother. The problem was, the members of the church didn't take any action against the offender. Paul had some harsh words for them. In the end, he said, "Out with him!"

He also heard of reports that some false teachers have crept in the Corinthian church and are deceiving a lot of them. Paul says, "*Do not be yoked together with unbelievers. For what do righteousness and wickedness have in common? Or what fellowship can light have with darkness?*" (2 Cor. 6:14 NIV) Paul is saying, "You better stop mingling with guys who don't teach the truth."

The church in New Testament times was not a perfect church. Paul knew that and he was careful to admonish the Ephesians to keep their unity at all cost. He knew the pain that a break-up in fellowship brought. And so, to prevent it from ever happening, what was Paul's advice? This brings us to the next question which is...

#### **IV. WHAT STRENGTHENS FELLOWSHIP?**

Paul says, *"He died for us so that, whether we are awake or asleep, we may live together with him. Therefore encourage one another and build each other up, just as in fact you are doing."* – 1 Thessalonians 5:10-11 (NIV)

*"Carry each other's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ."* – Galatians 6:2 (NIV)

These two verses clearly spell out how we can strengthen our fellowship. What is it? ENCOURAGEMENT! That word keeps coming up in Paul's letters. He was big in encouragement. He knew that's the only way the church will ever grow.

How do we encourage one another; how do we strengthen one another; how do we build one another up? I'd like to suggest three things.

##### **1. First, listen.**

You know, when you listen, you're saying to the other person, "I'm interested in what you're saying. I value what you say. I care for you." And the other person senses that. In that way, they're encouraged. But what if you're the kind of person who can't wait to say your piece when someone is talking?

You're someone who interrupts the other person always? Or you keep looking at your watch? I think it's obvious what you're trying to convey. "What you think doesn't matter to me. I don't care what you say." Have you been in that situation when the other person doesn't seem to be listening? Ladies, have you been in that situation? I know I have. And I'm the culprit.

Let me confess something. I was a perfect suitor but I'm not a perfect husband. You know what I mean? Before my wife and I were married, I was always all ears to her. Then, something changed a few years later after we got married. She would talk and I would pretend to listen. A few times she would catch me. She would ask, "So, what do you think?" And I didn't know what to think. When we were in the car, she would talk and tell me a story and when my phone rings, by instinct I would immediately reach for my phone which, of course, also immediately started a volcanic eruption. Now, I've learned. I have become a good listener. Experience is the best teacher.

The lesson is: when you're not listening, the other person will feel deflated.

Bill Clinton, despite his weaknesses, is said to be a very well-liked person. That's why he won the presidency twice, making him the first democrat to be re-elected since Franklin Roosevelt. What was the secret of his success? He listened. He listened with interest. I saw that once in his campaign on TV. He stopped when an old lady tried to get his attention. Then, he leaned over to hear what the lady was saying and then shook her hand afterwards.

Speaking of Roosevelt, I read the story of what he did when he was president of the United States. He often endured long receiving lines at the White House and complained that no one really paid attention to what he said. One day, during a reception, he decided to try an experiment. To each person who came down the line and shook his hand he murmured,

"I murdered my grandmother this morning." The guests responded in typical fashion with phrases like, "Marvelous! Keep up the good work. We are proud of you. God bless you, sir."

It was not till the end of the line, while greeting the ambassador from Bolivia, that his words were actually heard. Unrattled, the ambassador leaned over and whispered, "I'm sure she had it coming."

That ambassador was surely a good listener with a great sense of humor.

Let's look at some scripture on this matter of listening.

*"He who answers before listening— that is his folly and his shame." –*

Proverbs 18:13 (NIV)

*"My dear brothers, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry" – James 1:19 (NIV)*

2. Second, pray for one another.

Paul says in 1 Thessalonians, *"Brothers, pray for us."* – 1 Thessalonians 5:25 (NIV). Then, also in 2 Thessalonians,

*"With this in mind, we constantly pray for you, that our God may count you worthy of his calling, and that by his power he may fulfill every good purpose of yours and every act prompted by your faith." – 2 Thessalonians 1:11 (NIV)*

I like the fact that folks in our church pray for one another. Every now and then, someone sends a prayer request through our prayer request messenger group or Fil-Am messenger group and, as you may observe, immediately people respond with encouragement and emojis. I just hope that we truly immediately pray.

Because it's so easy to hit the key and send an emoji but taking the time to pray is not as easy. I myself am guilty of that. Even before there were emojis, when someone says please pray for me, I will casually say, "I will", then tuck it away in the corner of my mind and forget about it. So as not to forget, what is the solution? When someone asks for prayer, I'll say, "Let's pray right now."

God works when we pray for one another. Do you know that? I heard a story on WGTS 91.9. One guy narrated the time he was diagnosed with brain tumor and he sent a prayer request through Facebook messenger to a few friends. So they did. And then his friends passed on the prayer request to their own friends through messenger. And this went around and gathered steam.

After a month, he went back to his doctor for a follow-up and you know what the doctor found out? He found out nothing. The tumor was totally gone.

James says, "*Pray for one another that you may be healed*". (*James 5:16 NIV*) Not only physically but spiritually as well and relationally and emotionally. God honors sincere and faith-filled prayers.

**3. And third, talk.** In *Ephesians 4:15*, we're told to "speak the truth in love," and often the most important truth people need to hear is just that God loves them. That he hasn't abandoned them. That regardless of how things look, God is in control and His ways are perfect and wise and good. Sometimes people need to hear that. And sometimes what people need to hear is not just that God loves them, but that you care about them. Let them hear that too.

This just barely scratches the surface. Every person is unique; everyone's needs are different. Being committed to fellowship will take time, and work, and a willingness to take some risks.

In this church, there are opportunities for fellowship. Our Sunday service is one. We get to meet people, ask how they're doing, sit together at lunch and share stories, heartaches, joys, and all. A small group gathering is another opportunity. We have five home groups and I hope we make the effort to meet. In a small group setting, fellowship is more intimate and personal. We get to unburden more of ourselves and get encouraged in our faith and develop a bond with others that's not possible in a bigger setting.

Our prayer meeting affords us also the chance to pray for each other. We get encouraged knowing that others pray for us and hearing about God's answers to prayers.

Fellowship isn't always fun or easy. But we need it desperately. And we need each other. Because we need Christ, and Christ comes to us through one another.

So let's show the world that the church is more than just a social club with a spiritual flavor. Let's show the world that the church is a place with real relationships, and real love, where real life change is taking place. Let's show the world what real fellowship looks like. Amen?