

Taking Fellowship Seriously



by Jim Salladin



Anglican Agenda Series ♦ J.I. Packer, editor

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Preface To The Series

The Anglican Agenda series of publications aims to open up current questions that call for thought, discussion, prayer and decision among members of the Anglican Church of Canada at this time. The series is sponsored by the Essentials movement, which seeks all-round renewal of life and strength in the Anglican Church, and its writers are Anglican Church personnel speaking out of their loyalty to the Church and their acute sense of its present needs. It is hoped that the series will spark deep personal reflection and group discussion within and between parishes, so that we all may be better prepared for the difficult and demanding era into which, as it seems, our Church is now entering.

J.I.PACKER
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Introduction

The most obvious reason to take fellowship seriously is that there is simply no way to ignore it. We humans are built for fellowship. We crave it, we need it, we look for it constantly, and if we find ourselves without it, we will invent surrogates for it. But the one thing we cannot do, is ignore it.

If you are like a lot of people in Canada, you live your life in a throng of people and yet, you remain dissatisfied with the relationships that matter the most. I live in Vancouver, British Columbia. The typical Vancouverite is caught up in a pin-ball machine sort of life—bouncing between work, family, friends, and, for a few of us, church. In theory all of these networks are potential sources of deep relationship—generally we know of people at work or church or elsewhere that we would like to know better. But that takes time, and we just do not have enough of it to actually get to know them, much less allow ourselves to be known by them.

But there is more to the problem than just time. Our Western commitment to individual rights can turn in on itself so that we begin to value ourselves before everyone else. We usually would not articulate it like that—we know it is impolite to say it straight—but we have all been raised to relate to people around us on the basis of how they can contribute to our individual pursuits. Think about work. Most of us are loyal to our employer and co-workers, but our loyalty ends the moment our job ceases to assist us in our lives or career. Think about family. We dream of romance, but as a society, we turn to divorce when our marriages cease to meet our felt needs. And then there is church. North American Christians attend the church that we perceive most effective in providing the spiritual products we feel we need. When a church fails to meet our expectations, we look elsewhere. The reality is, we belong to a “me-centred” culture, and we are far more “me-focused” than most of us imagine.

It is no wonder our society is so lonely. On the one hand we pin-ball

from social network to social network, never allowing enough time to grow deep with each other. But on the other hand, we continually evaluate each other, sizing each other up to see if further relationship is useful. It is hard to trust other people when you realize that they are looking for ways to use you, and it is impossible to risk becoming vulnerable to people like that. Our individualistic approach to life condemns us to superficiality; and so, like a child who has lost his mother at a mall, we feel alone and frightened by the crowd.

God has a Different Vision

But in the midst of our aloneness, we have a sneaking suspicion, an aching desire, perhaps a desperate hope, that something better is on offer. You can see it in all the movies. When we, as a society, end a story with “and they lived happily ever after,” what we mean is that they enjoyed good relationships ever after. The stories we tell betray the hopes we hold—we want fellowship, and we want better, deeper, closer fellowship than we currently experience.

There is good news. God wants the same thing. He designed us with a deep hunger for fellowship and community, and he did not give us the hunger in order to torture us. He gave us the hunger because he fully intends to satiate it.

God designed us like that because he is like that. Genesis 1 says that human beings were created in God’s image—we were intended to be a sort of chip off the old block. And because God himself is a community, we had to be designed for that as well. God exists eternally as Father, Son and Holy Spirit—one God in three persons—a team whose united action reveals them as perfectly one being. When God decided to create humanity, he could not create us in his own image unless he programmed us for a similar kind of fellowship to that which he enjoys. So that is what he did.

But as you know, things went wrong. Humanity opted to try fellowship with a serpent instead of with God, and we have been suffering the lonely consequences ever since. In fact, the entire story of the Bible could be described as the tale of God re-creating a new sort of fellowship. It is a fellowship, a community, that is completely out of sync with the world, but one that is in sync with the culture of heaven. It is so out of the ordinary, that the Apostle Paul called it a new man—that is, a New Humanity—a new variety of human beings that are united together in Christ, and because of that, they are united to each other in ways

that the rest of the world can only hunger for. This reality is called the Church.

There are a lot of ways to describe the church and the fellowship God wants for it, but here let me point out just three distinguishing marks that make it different from any other sort of community that our world knows.

First, the Church is to be a community marked by—Pre-emptive Love

Love is one of the cheapest words in the English language—we use the one word to say how much we like dogs, tacos, chocolate and children. The love that God wants for his church is however not cheap; it is really quite costly.

The Greek word is *agape*, and it meant something different than simply the love found between romantic lovers or even friends. *Agape*, in the New Testament, is a sacrificial commitment to someone else's highest good. Now, that sounds nice and ideal and even noble—something that works well in a fairy tale. But according to the Scriptures, God is deadly serious about it. He is so serious about it, that it moved him to send his Son to die upon the Cross for us. That is the sort of love that should animate the church's fellowship. It is opposite from the world's sort of love. The world's love is reactive and contingent—we love because there is something attractive in the other person. *Agape* is pre-emptive. It loves the other person **before** there is anything attractive in them. That is the way God loves us, and that is the way we are to love each other (1 John 4:10-12).

Secondly, the Church is to be a community marked by—Sacrificial Service

Agape always gets practical. That is one of the ways it is different from the world's love. Most of us can feel warm and affectionate toward someone, call it love, and not do anything about it. *Agape* does not work like that. The love that God wants to characterize his fellowship is a love that is hard at work serving other people. When I was growing up, my father's hands were always stained. It was not that he did not clean them; it was that his type of labour simply left permanent marks on his hands. As a kid, I admired them, because I knew it was a sign that he worked hard and enjoyed it. That is the way things are in the church. The church's fellowship is always permanently stained with the hard, joyous work of loving service.

And that means that every member of the church is focused on us-

ing any resources available to build their brothers and sisters up in every good way imaginable. It means we use the best gifts we have, things like time and energy, abilities and money, for the sake of other people in the church. That is why it is always sacrificial. Again, it turns our natural instincts on their head. Typically, we are inclined to use our best resources for our own benefit. The church's fellowship charts a ridiculously counter-intuitive path. We look for every possible way to serve other people.

Thirdly, the Church is to be a community marked by—Undeserved Forgiveness

I said that *agape* always gets practical. That is true. *Agape* always leads us to real people, real service, real sacrifice. That sounds good, but there is another piece to it. If it is true that *agape* always gets practical, then it is also true that *agape* also always gets hurt. C.S. Lewis says it well, “To love at all is to be vulnerable. Love anything, and your heart will certainly be wrung and possibly be broken...the only place outside Heaven where you can be perfectly safe from all the dangers and perturbations of love is Hell,” (*The Four Loves*, Harcourt Inc, New York: 1960, p. 121).

There is a strange sense in which *agape*, the love that characterizes the fellowship God wants for his church, both creates the need for forgiveness and also the resources for forgiveness. It creates the need for forgiveness because true love moves us toward other people in dangerous ways. Get a group of people in a room together for long enough, and someone will do something that needs forgiving. But *agape* also gives us the resources to forgive. Remember, *agape* is pre-emptive; it loves before there is anything attractive in the other person. That is how Christ loved us. And so when we are hurt by someone—even in truly egregious, painful ways—*agape* moves us to continue loving the other person despite good reason to do otherwise. Forgiveness means pardoning other people even when they deserve rejection, simply because you love them with God's sort of love.

And that makes the church the safest dangerous community in the world. The church is dangerous because getting hurt is still inevitable. But the church is the safest sort of dangerous place, because it is the one place where people can be fully known. Most human beings are never fully, deeply known by any one else, and for good reason. We all suspect that other people care for us because we are attractive, at least in some way, and so we take all necessary measures to ensure that we maintain the attractive veneer. We do not confess faults or admit failure—we hide

them—because if they are revealed, we will be rejected. But the church is supposed to be different. The church is composed of people who have received Christ’s undeserved *agape* through his death on the Cross, and so we love others even in their guilt and ugliness. That makes the church the one place in the world where we can be fully, transparently known.

It all sounds good, doesn’t it? The yearning you have for fellowship is there because God put it there. God put it there in order to satisfy it, and he satisfies it in the church. The church is a community that is entirely different from any other community in the world, because it is marked by pre-emptive love, sacrificial service and undeserved forgiveness. Add it all up and you have a community that is uniquely suited to foster deep trust and intimacy. It fosters trust because we know the people around us love with a genuine, sacrificial love—they are looking out not only for their own interests, but also for our interests as well. It fosters intimacy because we can actually risk being known—we can get honest and open without being rejected.

It is what we have all been looking for.

But of course, there is a problem. And you know well what it is.

Why trying hard will not work

The problem is that it just does not happen this way, or at least it rarely happens this way. Anyone who has been in the church for any length of time knows that it does not measure up. Too often we experience the church to be the *least* loving place we frequent.

It is easy, and strangely enjoyable, to blame the institution. There is no doubt that the institutional church is flawed, but that is the cheap way out. The problem is deeper than that. Actually, the problem is closer than that. The problem is inside us—each of us. Ever since Adam and Eve rejected God’s fellowship, we have been wired toward loving ourselves and not toward loving other people. We continually find ourselves sliding backward from real fellowship to false fellowship, and no matter how hard we try, we fail.

The solution is not for us to simply try harder at fellowship. That will not work. The best it will do is cover up the problem like cheap cologne covers up a week without a shower. It still smells cheap and dirty. We need something that will re-orient our hearts from self-love to *agape* love. That is a tall order, and it requires something more drastic than we can provide.

It requires something that only God can give. He has to re-orient our

hearts. He has to do a miracle. He has to fill our hearts with love that we cannot naturally produce. This is a critical point. Fellowship is a gift. It is not something that we earn or build—we lack the resources to do it. Fellowship is something that God the Father gives us, at the request of Jesus, by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Jesus Asks the Father to give us His Fellowship—John 17

Thankfully, just before the Cross, Jesus asked his Father to give us that gift. It is all in John chapter 17. Just hours before he was arrested, Jesus knelt down within earshot of his disciples, and prayed to his Father. It is the longest prayer of Jesus that we have; it expresses his deepest desires for his people, and the prayer is all about fellowship.

But he requests a very specific sort of fellowship. His prayer is that we might experience a sort of fellowship that previously was only known by God himself. The Father, the Son, the Holy Spirit, the they who are he, have always lived in perfect fellowship. God originally designed us to participate in that fellowship, but, again, we opted for fellowship with Satan, and it all became flawed. So it is not a surprise that when Jesus asks God to fix the problem, he prays that our fellowship in the church might follow the same pattern as Jesus' fellowship with his Father.

Think about a large bonfire on the beach. A good bonfire has at least three requirements. It needs fuel (generally a big pile of dry wood); it needs ignition (a match, perhaps assisted by some kerosene); and once it is going, it gives off enough heat to warm a large crowd of good friends sitting on the sand. The fellowship Jesus prays for works similarly. It is fuelled by a clear perception of truth, ignited by the love of the Holy Spirit, and it radiates outward toward other people.

Jesus' Fellowship with his Father is fuelled by a clear perception of truth, and so is ours with each other.

Let's start with the fuel. Read through John 17. If you do, you will notice that Jesus' prayer is full of words having to do with truth. He talks about knowing God (vv. 3, 25); he talks about manifesting God's name (v. 6, 26); he says that he made known God's words (vv. 6, 8, 14); and he prays that his disciples might be sanctified in the truth, just like he is (vv. 17-19).

Why does Jesus pray so much about truth, and how does it relate to fellowship?

The reason is relatively straightforward. Jesus' fellowship with his

Father begins with a perfect understanding of his Father's character. All through eternity past, the Father and the Son enjoyed total fellowship, and that meant that they knew each other comprehensively, through and through. There is nothing about the Father that the Son does not know; there is nothing about the Son that the Father does not know. There were no secrets, no surprises, no hidden agendas to worry about.

And because Jesus knew his Father so well, he could trust his Father completely. You cannot really trust someone you do not know. Part of the reason that we find it so difficult to trust other people is that we suspect that they are hiding something from us. We hide things from other people, and we know that they hide things from us. And because of that, we walk cautiously in our relationships. But it is different between Jesus and his Father. Jesus knows his Father in every possible way, and that knowledge creates perfect trust. And because he trusted his Father completely, he knew a deep relational security—he could count on his Father to see him through the Cross to the Resurrection and on to glory. And that security, in turn, gave him courage to love in a sacrificial manner.

Something similar happens within the church. In his prayer, Jesus promised to continually make God's character clear to us (v. 26), with the result that through that knowledge we might know real fellowship. Think about your own family. As you were growing up, you came to know your parents better than any one else. You knew their strengths and their weaknesses, their virtues and their vices. In all likelihood, the character of your parents set the tone for your home. If they were angry and bitter, then that probably characterized the rest of the family. If they were loving and nurturing, then that influenced every one else as well. The same is true for God and God's family. His character sets the tone for the church. We look at the Cross and we realize he is more worthy of our trust than anyone imaginable. As our trust and security increases, and as our fears and anxieties decrease, we are freed to courageously love other people. The wood is set for a bonfire of fellowship.

Jesus' Fellowship with his Father is ignited by the love of the Holy Spirit, and so is ours with each other.

But a bonfire is more than just fuel. A bonfire needs to be ignited. And that ignition happens when the Holy Spirit pours out love on the church.

Look at verse 26:

I made known to them your name, and I will continue to make it known, **that the love with which you have loved me may be in them**, and I in them.

Jesus' request is that the Father would include us in the love that has always existed between them. All through eternity, Jesus not only knew his Father perfectly, he also loved his Father entirely. And not only did he give love to his Father, he also received love from his Father. When you look at the rest of the New Testament, it seems that the love between God the Son and God the Father is eternally actualized and achieved by God the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit, throughout all time and even before there was time, has bound the Father and the Son together in love so perfect, so intense, so satisfying, that it makes them one God in full expression. Jesus wants us to get in on that love.

How does that happen? According to verse 26, as the church looks at Jesus and learns more about the Father, the Holy Spirit comes and performs a miracle. The Holy Spirit pours his love into our hearts. He pours out love like ignited kerosene on a pile of wood. The wood was dry and cool before, but the moment the kerosene and spark come together, the wood bursts into flames. That is what happens in the church; that is what must happen within us if we are to know the fellowship that God intends.

Remember what we said earlier. God desires the church to be marked by *agape*—pre-emptive love. He wants our fellowship to grow out of a sacrificial commitment to other peoples' highest good. But the problem is that our sin makes us inwardly inclined toward the opposite. We are wired to love our selves and not other people. When the Holy Spirit fills our hearts with love, he changes the wiring in our hearts. He gives us the love he wants us to express.

The first way we notice it is that we are filled with delight in who God is. As we learn about him in his Word, looking at Jesus, we notice in ourselves a growing joy in who God is, what God has done, and how God promises to work in the world. That joy is the first taste of the Holy Spirit's re-wiring love. It is his first step in weaning us from self-love and toward loving God.

The second way we notice it is that we begin to sense God's extravagant love toward us. The Apostle Paul in Ephesians 3:14-21 prays that we might be strengthened by the Spirit in order that we may know the height and breadth and depth of Christ's love. That sense of God's love causes a revolution in the human soul. We rest in the *agape* for which we

were designed, and it wells up and overflows toward the people around us.

And that leads us to the third aspect of a bonfire—after fuel and ignition comes heat.

Jesus' fellowship with his Father radiates outward toward other people, and so does ours with each other.

There is something about God's love that makes him want to share it with others. Go back to John 17, verse 21. Jesus prays, "that...just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that **they also may be in us...**" God is absolutely satisfied in his own love. He does not need anything. The Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are so completely fulfilled in their mutual love that nothing could possibly add to the fullness of their love. And yet, for some reason, their love, their *agape*, moves the Trinity to desire to share it with others. As a bonfire radiates heat and warms the people around it, so God's love always wants to share itself.

That is the way real love always works. There is something about love that makes us want to share it with others. A healthy married couple may be totally happy with their marriage, and yet they still want to have children. It is not that they are dissatisfied with their marriage and so they want to make up for it with children—it is the opposite. Their desire to have children is an expression of the richness of their love for each other. That is what happened in the Trinity. God the Father, God the Son, God the Holy Spirit were so fulfilled in one another's love that they decided to share the overflow with others. That is why Jesus prayed verse 21.

The same thing happens in the church. When the church sees God clearly by looking at Jesus in his Word, the Holy Spirit floods our hearts with his kerosene-like *agape*. The church becomes alight with joy in who God is—we begin to love God. But at the same moment, those in the church begin to love each other. You cannot have a bonfire that produces no heat, and you cannot have a church that loves God, which does not at the same time radiate that *agape* outward toward other people. You cannot love the God of love without at the same time loving the objects of his love—namely, in this case, other Christians. That is why Jesus prays that we may be one. Our unity, which is another way of talking about our fellowship, is the by-product and the overflow of God's love in us.

Bonfires are dangerous. They are dangerous because they radiate heat;

and the heat they radiate is hot enough to set other things on fire. The same is true of the church's fellowship. When the Trinity's *agape* invades a group of people and they begin to love each other in sacrificial ways, the world notices and gets interested. Verse 21 again; Jesus prays, "...that they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, **so that the world may believe that you have sent me.**" Apparently, Jesus' strategy for church mission was based on his plan for church fellowship. Often we think of the two as separate. Fellowship is the church's internal life; mission is the church's external life. Not so. Christian fellowship is mission. At least it is in this sense: the world will begin to consider the claims of Christ when the world sees the church members loving each other in sacrificial ways. It will do no good to argue with non-Christians about the truth of Christ if it is done outside the context of loving, self-sacrificing, costly fellowship.

And that is why taking fellowship seriously is so eternally serious.

Let's Get Practical: Three Models for Encouraging Fellowship in the Church

We said before that *agape* always gets practical. Theology is great, but theology put into practice is greater. That is all the more true of fellowship. It will do us no good to talk about fellowship and dream about it if we never get down to business and do it. Down through the history of the church there have been many different models for helping the church enact fellowship, and all of them have some merit. But if we take John 17 as our lead, any good model will have to do three things:

First, it must focus our attention upon Christ, through his Word.

Second, it must move us to be filled by the Spirit with love for God and each other.

Third, it must open us to invite others to share in God's fellowship.

The church can, and should, get creative in how it encourages fellowship. But whatever methods we employ must achieve these three objectives.

Here are three paths that have stood the test of time.

The Local Church Gathering

For some it is obvious that the local church gathering is the starting place for Christian fellowship. But that will not be so clear for others. The Sunday gathering is often so large that deep friendships simply do

not develop. Any group over 75 or 100 will be too large for any sort of real intimacy. That has led some to abandon the idea that the Sunday gathering is integral to fellowship. That is a mistake. The Sunday gathering may not be the place where deep relationships develop, but it is the place that sets the tone for how fellowship will work throughout the rest of the church.

The Sunday gathering sets the tone for fellowship in the first instance, by gathering the people around God's Word. If it is true that Christian fellowship is fuelled by a clear perception of God's truth, and that we find that truth by looking at Jesus in the Scriptures, then it follows that the teaching ministry on Sundays is essential to building authentic fellowship. This is the first way that the priest fosters fellowship. He or she proclaims the Word in the power of the Spirit. As that happens, as the people see Jesus clearly through the Scriptures read and proclaimed and taught, the Holy Spirit will do his work of filling the people with *agape*. But on the other hand, if the pulpit fails, fellowship fails. If the church's leaders fail to rightly exposit the Word of truth in the Sunday gathering, the people's vision of God will be obscured, and they will be cut off from the Spirit's igniting work. If you find your church lacking in fellowship, ask yourself whether the Word is proclaimed. If it is not, that is the first issue you should address.

The second way the Sunday gathering sets the tone for the church's fellowship is by gathering the people around the Table. The sacrament of Holy Communion is one of the most vivid and powerful displays of Christian fellowship that we have. It is the foretaste of the heavenly banquet, the foretaste of the day in which our fellowship with God and each other will be total and complete. But it also draws us back to the moment when our fellowship was purchased. As we remember Christ's death and resurrection, God's *agape* becomes vivid, even tactile, and there the Spirit fills our hearts with his love so that Christ himself is present to us. Nowhere is the Gospel clearer. Nowhere is the Presence of Christ more palpable. Nowhere is our fellowship with God more intense. And of course, we receive Communion with each other. We come before God together. We receive the Gospel together. And even though we are not focused on each other in that moment, perhaps for that very reason, our fellowship with each other is closer to heaven than ever.

The Sunday gathering also unites us for the world. The Sunday service is one of the first places people will encounter the Gospel. It is the public face of the church, and because fellowship always radiates out to share

with others, we should expect that our fellowship will have evangelistic appeal. Francis Schaeffer famously called this the “final apologetic,” (*The Mark of the Christian*. InterVarsity Press, Downers Grove: 1970.) The world will always marshal evidence against Christ, but their arguments will not stand before God’s *agape*, any more than Rome could stand before the early church’s fellowship. “O, look at how they love one another,” sighed the mighty Roman Empire, and folk were converted. That is what God wants for your church.

The Home Group Bible Study

If the Sunday gathering sets the tone for fellowship, then the home group bible study is where the full symphony plays out. The model is simple: a smaller group of Christians gather together sometime during the week for bible study, prayer and friendship. As simple as the idea sounds, the depth of relationships and the growth in discipleship that can result is tremendous.

A good home group or small group will focus, as a general rule, on studying the Bible. There is always a temptation to go light on this item, but that is the one thing you should never do. God gives the gift of fellowship as we look at him, in his Word. And that implies that the quickest way to kill fellowship is to starve it by removing the Scriptures from its centre. It is precisely as we look away from each other, toward Christ revealed in Scripture, that we have a sporting chance of truly loving each other any way at all.

But small groups do more than just study. Small groups pray together. Friendships in the world are usually fostered by playing together—a game, a drink after work, a party etc. Christian friendship is fostered, uniquely, by praying together. As we see Jesus clearly in his Word, the Spirit gives us the gift of love, and we respond by praying—both in song and in spoken word—and expressing our delight in who God is and what God does. It is in that context that we bring each other’s concerns before the One who gives every good gift.

As soon as the small group is teaching each other from the Scripture and lifting each other before the Lord in prayer, you will find that it is a long way toward being a group of friends. But the friendships will be different than the world’s friendships. The friendships within a small group may or may not be the close buddy sort of friendships. The group should not be a clique in that sense. Rather, it should grow into a community of people who express *agape* by using every resource they have to build

each other up in Christ. That means that each member should labour to discover his or her gifts and use them to the fullest for the good of the group.

Accountability Group

If the small group is the full symphony of fellowship, the accountability group is something like an individual music lesson. This is where a very small group—two, three, four, people—gathers on a regular basis to dig into each other's lives and support each other in discipleship. It may or may not include bible study, but it always includes three aspects: confession, Gospel, forgiveness.

Accountability groups always begin with confession. This is a scary thing for all of us, but joining a group like this means that you are committing yourself to full disclosure. No secrets. No white lies. Just the truth. It is frightening, but it is also amazingly freeing. All of us yearn to be fully known by another person. On the one hand we cherish our secrets but on the other hand they are open wounds that cry out for healing. The fellowship God desires for us, and the fellowship we desire deep within ourselves, includes fully unveiling our secrets and shame before a mature brother or sister. Only then will we deeply grasp what it means to be fully known by God.

Full disclosure, by itself, does nothing. The Gospel must be applied to the hidden parts of our lives. That is the second function of an accountability group. The group's job is to remind each other of how the Gospel applies to their individual lives and joys and failures and sorrows. It may or may not be a Bible study, but it is certainly a place where Scripture truth is applied—explicitly—to the previously secret sins and wounds we share.

After the Gospel comes forgiveness. Once the secrets are open, the Gospel is proclaimed, then the forgiveness of God is announced for each other. This is an experience few people know, but when you have opened your heart to a Christian brother or sister, heard the Gospel proclaimed into your individual situation, and then received their announcement of forgiveness, you will know a depth of God's love that surpasses knowledge. This is the moment when God takes our sin, which is reprehensible, and makes it the occasion for him to pour out love upon us, into our hearts, and equip us to extend that love toward others.

Taking it Seriously

There is no way to avoid it, so you might as well take it seriously. Fellowship is in your bones. You want it, you crave it, and even though it is costly and difficult, it is worth it. Our society will tell you that you can find the relationships you desire in many other places beside the church. Satan will tell you that you can have fellowship without tough things like truth and accountability. Your flesh will tell you that the pleasurable surrogates you invent for yourself really are satisfying after all. Do not believe any of it. Run after the fellowship God intended for you. Run to the church.

But it is not as easy as that. The church needs renewal. And the renewal of true fellowship is central to the overall renewal that is needed. As you run to your church you will likely find that the fellowship it currently experiences falls somewhat short of God's design. In that case, taking fellowship seriously will mean putting your shoulder to the plough and working hard to build it. To change the metaphor, taking fellowship seriously will mean building a bonfire in your church. You should start with the fuel—the Word of God taught, applied and trusted. Then comes the ignition—pray for the Holy Spirit to give your church the love it lacks. As that begins to happen, as the Spirit gives the gift of fellowship, you will see your church transformed. You will see *agape* springing up and serving. You will see lives changed. You will see people from different races, nationalities, ages and classes all joining together in praise of their Lord. And there, you will gain a glimpse of heaven, and the world will watch and desire, and some will begin to suspect that the Gospel of Christ is true after all.

Why wouldn't you take fellowship seriously?



Questions for Study and Discussion

1. In what ways do you think Canadian society and culture encourages or discourages real fellowship? Where does our society go to satisfy our longing for relationships? How may the church become the place where it is met?
2. The biblical vision of fellowship is marked by *agape*, pre-emptive love. What might your church or small group look like if it really was characterized by this sort of love?
3. Often people think of truth and fellowship as separate values in the church. How do they relate to each other? In what ways is a church's commitment to the truth of God's Word connected to its experience of authentic fellowship?
4. What is the Holy Spirit's role in the church's fellowship? How should this direct our prayer?
5. Often people think that the church's outward mission is separate from its inward fellowship. How are they related? In what ways does fellowship support and encourage mission and evangelism?
6. What do you need to do in order to take fellowship seriously?

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