

TEACHING NOTES

'Anchored in Christ' Part Six: The Fellowship Factor

Scriptures: Ecclesiastes 4:9-12, Acts 2:42-47, Ephesians 2:14-22

This week we consider the topic of fellowship in our 'Anchored in Christ' series. Each of these topics is intended to help and encourage us to bring all aspects of our lives into an alignment with Christ, and today's topic is very relevant when we are all forced to live in isolation during the lockdown.

Fellowship is something we have all experienced if we have enjoyed the company of friends, or others with similar interests to us. We share about our passions and love to connect. However, fellowship gets beyond meeting and greeting or exchanging pleasantries, to a deeper level of sharing. Made in God's image we are hard-wired as human beings to interact with and enjoy connection. This is because when we do, we participate in the lives of others. This mirrors an important truth about God's nature and character: God is a Trinity of Three Persons. One old Puritan captured this nicely when they said, "God in Himself is a sweet society." I like that description!

We are made in the image of a Trinitarian God, the God who exists co-eternally in Three Persons: the Father, the Son, and Holy Spirit. Each member of the Godhead is in perfect relationship. There's hierarchy and submission: the Son did the Father's will, and the Spirit speaks not on his own authority but on that of the Son's. God is three times holy, God is love, and always good. This why we look to the Trinity as the model of relationship.

So, if we are made in God's image we too, need close and harmonious relationships to thrive. We're not meant to live in isolation, cut off from others. We can understand that though, if a person has been hurt and it is then natural to withdraw. A bit like a snail sensing danger will withdraw into its shell – but it can't stay there! The famous poem by John Donne reminds us, 'No man is an island'; 'every man is a piece of the continent', 'a part of the main', as he puts it. And he's right.

Jesus had a close relationship with the Father because he was God the Son. As the God-Man who walked among humanity we can think of his relationship as being *vertical* with the Father, but at the same time *horizontal* with the disciples and others (which makes a cross shape, by the way!).

Centuries before Jesus, Solomon mused on our need for co-operation and companionship when he said a 'a cord of three strands is not quickly broken'. (**Ecclesiastes 4:12**). This proverb applies to all relationships. Individualism and divisions make for weakness. There is a proper complex of power in a three-strand rope, provided the strands are good and support one another. Although it's only implied in the text, we know too, that Solomon is referring to his relationship with God (vertical relationship), as well, of course, with others (horizontal relationships).

In **Ephesians 2:14-22**, Paul offers important theological reflections on the work of Christ. The cross abolished rules separating Jews and Gentiles, and the resentment that existed

because the law favoured Jews and excluded Gentiles. He speaks of two being one; of peace rather than hostility, and reconciliation to God. Reconciliation with God and each other comes only through Christ. **Verse 19** in the *NIV* begins with 'consequently' which is a preposition; a connecting word linking what Christ has achieved, with the implications for the church and Christian living. He draws on the analogy of a building – and remember Jewish religious and cultural life had centred around the Temple. When the foundation is right the superstructure remains solid. Paul refers to the 'living building', or to use another of his metaphors, the 'body of Christ' which is the Church. Each body part has its own function but designed to work together. The gathered people of God is a living, divine, and dynamic community, tasked with sharing Christ's reconciliation with all people.

Our final Scripture is **Acts 2:42-47**. It's a vision of Christian community in fellowship with God and others. It's vertical in relationship with God, and very much horizontal; it's outward focused, practical and blessing others. And, there's another aspect too: people from outside were drawn into the family of faith *which grew daily*. Human efforts to create this sort of oneness and sharing get distorted (as in Socialism and Communism), often resulting in totalitarianism and great suffering. The fellowship of believers was primarily a Christian community characterised by teaching, communion, prayer, and serving others. Christ was the cornerstone. Efforts to create social and spiritual harmony without God will ultimately fail because egos, power trips, and control take over.

Fellowship is never about staying at home and doing your own thing except during the lockdown! We have to make the best of this situation but there's really no substitute for being connected, and being accountable – *together*.

An essential aspect of being Anchored in Christ is the Fellowship Factor. Of course, we all need at times to withdraw, seek quiet, and be away from others. That's important (it's draining emotionally to be always giving out and the Scriptures are pretty clear about rest). But, to be fully human we need to engage, be together, and simply enjoy fellowship with others.

As the COVID-19 restrictions continue we should remember physical isolation shouldn't mean social isolation. Perhaps this week we could make it a goal to contact someone we haven't spoken to in a while. That could make all the difference in their life and we will likely get blessed as well!

Questions to ponder

1. It's not uncommon today to 'believe without belonging'. This may mean staying at home and enjoying TV and web-based services, and perhaps being part of para-church groups – but not being part of a local fellowship. What is the problem with this?
2. Read again the Acts passage. What factors prevent our church (or any local fellowship) from looking like this? What might need to change?
3. It has been said we get hurt in relationships – but we also get healed in relationships. What can the local fellowship do to rebuild trust and restore fellowship to people in this situation?