

The Joy of Genuine Community

“They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Everyone was filled with awe, and many wonders and miraculous signs were done by the apostles. All the believers were together and had everything in common. Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he 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 2:42-47).

In 1970 the secular futurist, Alvin Toffler, published a book entitled *Future Shock*, which attempted to predict the affect of the coming technological revolution on the next generation. Unfortunately, many of Toffler’s predictions were accurate. He had this to say about the institution of marriage. “They will know, too, that when the paths of husband and wife diverge, when there is too great a discrepancy in developmental stages, they may call it quits ... And when the opportunity presents itself, they will marry again ...and again ... and again” (*Future Shock*, p. 251). Here is what he observed concerning the difficulties of friendship in a transient society. “Each time the family moves, it tends to slough off a certain number of just plain friends and acquaintances. Left behind, they are virtually all but forgotten. Separation does not end all relationships. We maintain contact with, perhaps, one or two friends from the old location, and we tend to keep in sporadic touch with relatives. But with each move there is deadly attrition” (p. 107).

The fact is many of our maladies as a society can be traced to the lack of intimacy, friendship, community, and stability that mark the lifestyles of the 21st century. It is widely held that a solid support structure is critical for overcoming trauma, infirmity, or disability. Traditionally, the extended family and a network of long-term friendships are the first line of defense in times of distress. This refuge is failing in many cases. However, the church is perfectly suited to the task of providing support for those who struggle with difficult issues – which at some point includes each of us. No one, even professional helpers, can fill this vital support role more effectively than a church which follows the New Testament pattern of fellowship.

One of the most attractive things about the church of the New Testament is the sense of genuine comradeship they shared. This comradeship is reflected in the Greek term *koinonia*. This word essentially means to have a common share in something and is often translated as “fellowship.” The fellowship or friendship shared by the early church was more than a natural attraction or joy in being together. It was a supernatural sense of connectedness – a common bond. This common bond was spawned by one primary factor, their individual and corporate connection to the Lord. Each believing household had come into a vital, living relationship with the risen Lord. This fellowship *with* the Spirit spawned a fellowship *of* the Spirit with one another. Such a fellowship of the Spirit cannot be forced or contrived, but is God-given.

We see several things in the above passage about the New Testament church. The unique place the Spirit played in their lives actually birthed a fellowship of intimacy and friendship.

1) They shared corporate worship together. *“They devoted themselves to the apostles teaching . . . and they continued to meet in the temple courts.”* There is a false belief circulating that in order to have true fellowship one must sever ties with the larger, corporate church and devote oneself to a small, intimate house church experience. The intimacy of home groups was an ingredient in the life of the New Testament church but to teach a divorce from the wider church as the norm for Christian life is a caricature or heresy of New Testament teaching and makes intimacy an idol instead of a by-product of genuine faith. In our day and time we should be making our connection with the corporate church stronger, not weaker.

2) They shared a common experience of the supernatural. *“Everyone was filled with awe, and many wonders and miraculous signs were done by the apostles.”*

3) They shared a common concern for one another. *“Selling their possessions and goods they gave to anyone as he had need.”* This concern and sharing of goods was practiced on a voluntary basis and was not coerced. Someone has commented on the difference Communism and Christianity as follows. Communism says, what’s yours is mine. Christianity says what’s mine is yours. This common expression of concern was intended to be free, sincere, and glad. In addition, there had to be sufficient communication between people to know what the real needs were. This took place in the communion of daily fellowship.

4) They shared hospitality with one another. *“They broke bread in their homes and ate together...”*

5) The result of this *koinonia* was that they shared an attractive joy. They *“ate together with glad and sincere hearts.”* The corporate life of the early church caused them to radiate the joy of the Lord. It was not just a matter of their individual relationship with the Lord or their experience of God’s power in worship services, but their daily fellowship that generated a deeply satisfying sense of connectedness. The result? An attractive joy. The Spirit of the Lord used this attractive joy to draw people unto himself and bring about the growth of the first century church. *“(P)raising God and enjoying the favor of all the people . . . the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.”*

Are you an emotional orphan of 21st century disconnectedness or *anti-koinonia* – to koin (*sic*) a term! Here are some ideas:

1. Renew your relationship with the Lord. He is the source of all true intimacy and fellowship.
2. Repair your relationship with the corporate church. It’s a necessity.

3. Repair your relationship with others. Is anything hindering fellowship? Pray, serve, communicate, and forgive to restore bonds.
4. Reach out to those who, like you, need encouragement. God will bless you in surprising ways.
5. *Participate* in corporate worship, small group and church fellowship activities. (Is this too obvious?)
6. Do not be ashamed to acknowledge the Lord in your interactions with others including nominal Christians or unbelievers. At the same time, don't feel a need to force the spiritual issues. He has ways of making His presence known.
7. Mend old friendships, ask the Lord to bring new ones into your life. Be alert for answers to your prayer.

God has established a society – the church-- whose bonds of fellowship transcend the limitations of our hectic, transient 21st century life.