LESSON 6
SPIRITUAL FELLOWSHIP

"I Believe in the Communion of the Saints"

The apostle Paul's letter to the Romans is considered to be *the greatest letter ever written*. It is heralded as *a literary and theological masterpiece*. Christian and non-Christian historians alike have pointed to Romans as one of the most influential pieces of literature in Western civilization. Martin Luther called it "the chief part of the New Testament and the very purest Gospel," and John Calvin contended that Romans "opens the way to all the most hidden treasures of Scripture." Indeed, while "all Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness" (2 Tim 3:16), it seems that by God's providence, Paul's letter to the Romans was destined to occupy a special role in the revelation of God's plan of redemption.

Yet a portion of the letter that is frequently underappreciated is its conclusion. In a work filled with chapters of profound doctrine, the book concludes with a curious ending—a lengthy list of *greetings*. In fact, Romans 16 constitutes by far the longest list of greetings among all of Paul's New Testament letters. Eighteen times the word "greet" is used. Twenty-six personal names are mentioned. Three different churches are referenced. The chapter's twenty-seven verses are filled with affectionate descriptions of friends. And in the middle of it all, a strong warning is issued: "Now I urge you, brethren, keep your eye on those who cause dissensions and hindrances contrary to the teaching which you learned, and turn away from them" (Rom 16:17).

Indeed, Romans 16 raises the question: In such a profound, theological treatise, why did Paul reserve so much space for personal remarks and greetings to other Christians? Perhaps the best answer can be found in a line taken from the Apostles' Creed: **"I believe . . . in the communion of the saints."** In a letter filled with essential *soteriology* (the doctrine of salvation), Paul found it necessary to express consequent *ecclesiology* (the doctrine of the church). Paul did his best theological thinking in reference to *the church*. Although he had never visited the church in Rome before writing this letter, Paul felt a deep communion with the members of that church. It was not an abstract kind of attachment. Instead, it was personal. He knew names. He sensed fellowship. Such communion was even referenced all the way back in the letter's opening words (Rom 1:9–12):

> For God, whom I serve in my spirit in the preaching of the gospel of His Son, is my witness as to how unceasingly I make mention of you, always in my prayers making request, if perhaps now at last by the will of God I may succeed in coming to you. For I long to see you so that I may impart some spiritual gift to you, that you may be established; that is, that I may be encouraged together with you *while* among you, each of us by the other's faith, both yours and mine.

To Paul, spiritual fellowship was not a hypothetical. Because of what Jesus Christ had done for him, his soul was truly intertwined with all other believers—even with those he had never met. Though an apostle, he was no autonomous Christian. To the same extent that the church needed him for his authoritative teaching and leadership (Eph 2:20; 3:5), he needed the church for *community*.

In vivid fashion, Paul's greetings in Romans 16 communicate the beauty of Chrisian fellowship. They remind us about the privileges and obligations of this spiritual community we are to experience as Christians. It also motivates us to dig deeper into this important theme. When we do, we find several essential traits about spiritual fellowship:

I. A Means of Divine Grace

As we trace the theme of Christian fellowship through the New Testament, we find that it can be appropriately identified as one of the *means of grace*. Such a description should not be confused with the errant Roman Catholic teaching of *the sacraments*. Instead, when we speak of "the means of grace," we are describing the *channels* through which *God's unmerited favor* is bestowed upon His people. John MacArthur and Richard Mayhue describe these

"means" as follows: "They are the instruments through which God's Spirit graciously grows believers in Christlikeness as he fortifies them in the faith and conforms them into the image of the Son (2 Cor 3:17–18)" (*Biblical Doctrine*, 780).

For the Christian today, the following things comprise the *means* through which God grows believers in Christlikeness:

- ✓ Baptism
- ✓ The Lord's Supper
- ✓ Preaching
- ✓ Prayer
- ✓ Singing
- ✓ Giving
- ✓ Church Discipline
- ✓ Service
- ✓ Evangelism
- ✓ Fellowship

One of the texts that emphasizes the dispensing of fortifying grace through the means of Christian fellowship is Ephesians 4:15–16. Although the technical terminology of "fellowship" is not used, the concept is clearly present: "but speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in all *aspects* into Him who is the head, *even* Christ, from whom the whole body, being fitted and held together by what every joint supplies, according to the proper working of each individual part, causes the growth of the body for the building up of itself in love."

To describe the *result* of Christian community, Paul uses the metaphor of a *maturing body*. As all members of this body interact as intended, this body grows into the form it is destined to become—the likeness of Jesus Christ. Of Ephesians 4:15–16 John Owen stated, "It is the greatest and most glorious description of the communion of the saints that we have in the Scripture." Indeed, this communion is one of the vital *means of grace.* God blesses His people through it.

II. Defined by Shared Life

κοινωνία (*koinōnia*): "close association involving mutual interests and sharing."

The formal term for "fellowship" in the New Testament is the term κοινωνία (*koinōnia*). It can be defined simply as **"a close association involving mutual interests and sharing"** (BDAG). English translations of the term include "association," "communion," "fellowship," "participation," and "partnership."

It quickly becomes apparent that the use of *koinonia* in the New Testament implies that true Christian community requires an active participation in the life of another through the sharing of one's resources for his spiritual benefit. In other words, Christian *koinonia* is not synonymous with our culture's understanding of a social club, a political guild, or an association built around a particular hobby. It certainly isn't "social" in the way that many understand "social" today (as in *social media*). In fact, Christian *koinonia* finds no equal in the world. It is catagorically unique. It is *active*, not passive. It is *God-centered*, not secular. It is *spiritual* in nature, though it manifests itself in material ways. It is *participating,* not spectating. It is *contributing*, not merely *consuming.* It dedicates personal resources. It finds real joy in the betterment of another. It takes a genuine interest in another person and shares resources and experiences to propel that person toward Jesus Christ.

Such *koinonia* characterized the early church right from the first days of its existence: "So then, those who had received his word were baptized; and that day there were added about three thousand souls. They were continually devoting themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer" (Acts 2:41–42). Such *koinonia* then continued to define the church as it grew (Acts 2:46–47). It remains—whether in word or concept—a fundamental part of the church's existence throughout the apostolic age (e.g., Rom 15:1–2; 1 Cor 12:26; Gal 6:2; Phil 2:1–4; etc.).

III. Based on Union with the Triune God

This concept of *community* or *participation-in-life* did not evolve out of human ingenuity, preference, or traditions. Instead, biblical *koinonia* finds its basis in a most profound, transcendent source: our union with the *triune God*. God Himself is *One God in Three Persons*. Inter-trinitarian communion is itself the model for our communion. But in addition to that, we as born-again Christians have been *united* with the Triune God to share in His fullness of life. What God has done for us vertically we are to do horizontally. Our relationships with others are to serve as an analogy of what God has done for us. See John 17:20–21; 1 John 1:3. God the Father has called us "into fellowship [*koinonia*] with His Son" (1 Cor 1:9)—a fellowship that is also called "the fellowship of the Holy Spirit" (2 Cor 13:14; Phil 2:1). As John MacArthur stated,

> Anybody in fellowship with Jesus Christ is also in fellowship with anybody else in fellowship with Jesus Christ. This is our common ground. It is not social, economic, intellectual, cosmetic, or anything else superficial. *Our common ground is that which is pulsing through the life of every Christian—the heartbeat of God*. Our common ground is that we possess a common eternal life and are children in the same family. (*The Church: The Body of Christ*, 51)

IV. Oblivious to Earthly Distinctions

There are countless clubs, associations, guilds, and societies around us. They are built around every conceivable distinction and many of them provide benefits to our communities. (I will always look with fondness on my days as a member of the local Cub Scouts and 4-H associations!) But in the bigger picture, man is at enmity with man, and this enmity manifests itself in the inhumanity of ethnic and class tension and warfare.

Christian *koinonia* stands against such divisiveness. Describing the nature of this community, the apostle Paul writes, "There is one body and one Spirit, just as also you were called in one hope of your calling; one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all who is over all and through all and in all" (Eph 4:4–6). Since we all have the same heavenly Father, since we all have been redeemed by the same blood of the Redeemer, and since we all have been united by the same Holy Spirit, we are *one*—regardless of ethnic, social, linguistic, or economic differences.

In fact, a major emphasis in the book of Acts is how the *koinonia* of the early church gradually overcame the common divisions of the day. First, we see how the church begins by God incorporating a very diverse crowd of repentant Jews into one church (see Acts 2:9–11, 38–39, 41–42, 44–46). Then, we see how the church overcomes the distinction between Hebrew and Hellenistic Jews (see Acts 6:1–6). Then, we see how the church overcomes the distinction between Jews and Samaritans (see Acts 8:4–24). And then, we see how the church overcomes the distinction between Jews and Gentiles (see Acts 8:25–40; 10:1–11:24). All told, the early church was a complete *anomaly* to the world around it. Nothing like it existed. How it joined its members from different ethnicities and socio-economic classes was utterly unique—and for good reason. Paul explains this well in Galatians 3:28, Ephesians 2:11–22, and Colossians 3:11. Furthermore, those in the church who sought to maintain distinctions based on these earthly distinctions were called out as "judges with evil motives" (see James 2:1–11).

V. Impossible with Unbelievers

Nonetheless, there remains one necessary divide for fellowship: the divide between those "outside" and those "within" the household of faith. The apostle Paul states unequivocally that Christians *cannot share life* with unbelievers: "Do not be bound together with unbelievers; for what partnership have righteousness and lawlessness, or what fellowship has light with darkness? Or what harmony has Christ with Belial, or what has a believer in common with an unbeliever?" (2 Cor 6:14–15; see also Eph 5:6–8; James 4:4).

Of course, this does not mean that we *withdraw from the world*. This would be impossible. Paul himself recognizes this when he states that though we must not "associate" with a professing Christian caught in woeful hypocrisy, we still must "associate" with those in the world, for if you refused to do that, "you would have to go out of the world" (1 Cor 5:10). Nonetheless, *koinonia*—true community—can only be experienced with those who are believers. Our closest friends must always be those of like, precious faith. As the Puritan writer Thomas Brooks stated, "Let those be thy choicest companions who have made Christ their chief companion."

VI. Sinful to Neglect

We can only say that neglecting Christian fellowship is *sinful* if we have Scriptural warrant. Otherwise, we cannot bind the conscience. Thus, the all-important question is, does Scripture mandate *koinonia*? The answer is ***yes***—Scripture establishes the necessity of Christian fellowship by command and by example. Hebrews 10:24–25 is unequivocal:

> Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for He who promised is faithful; and let us consider how to stimulate one another to love and good deeds, not forsaking our own assembling together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging *one another;* and all the more as you see the day drawing near. (See also Heb 13:16.)

Scripture also establishes this necessity by example. See the emphasis on "continual" in Acts 2:42, 26. Summing up the biblical evidence, J. I. Packer writes,

> "Satan watcheth for those vessels that sail without a convoy."
>
> —George Swinnock

> We should not . . . think of our fellowship with other Christians as a spiritual luxury, an optional addition to the exercises of private devotion. We should recognize rather that such fellowship is a spiritual necessity, for God has made us in such a way that our fellowship with himself is fed by our fellowship with fellow Christians, and requires to be so fed constantly for its own deepening and enrichment. (*God's Words*, 193)

VII. A Priority to Protect

That which is most precious and necessary will always be most targeted by the enemy. As such, we should expect that Satan will diminish and deface the beauty and efficacy of Christian fellowship through things like *slander* and *division.* Consequently, strict warnings are given in Scripture against any who sow dissension and division in the church. See 1 Corinthians 1:10; Romans 16:17; Titus 3:9–11. At the same time, strong encouragements are given to cultivate unity. See Ephesians 4:1–3. Charles Spurgeon states it well,

> Satan always hates Christian fellowship; it is his policy to keep Christians apart. Anything which can divide saints from one another he delights in. He attaches far more importance to godly intercourse than we do. Since union is strength, he does his best to promote separation.

Sample Questions for Fostering Spiritual Fellowship

- What have you been reading in the Bible?
- How can I pray for you? Here's how you can pray for me.
- What opportunity for service has the Lord provided recently? What have been its blessings or challenges?
- Where has the Lord been at work in your life? What encouragement or conviction has He given you recently?
- Who needs our encouragement, prayer, or admonition? What should we do to help?
- Have you had any evangelistic opportunities lately? How did it go? What would you now do differently?

For Discussion

1. In your own words, define *koinonia* ("Christian fellowship"). What distinguishes it from "fellowship" in the world?
2. What are some of the "earthly distinctions" that continue to be a problem for you when fellowshipping with other believers in the church? How is the transforming power of the gospel eliminating such *partialities* from your life?
3. How would you counsel the Christian whose closest friends are unbelievers?
4. What practical things can you do to protect the *koinonia* of our church?
5. See the questions for fostering spiritual conversations listed above. Add your own questions to the list that would foster genuine Christian *koinonia.* Commit to keeping each other accountable in incorporating these into your conversations.

For Further Study

1. **Memorize:** John 13:34–35
2. **Read:** *True Community,* by Jerry Bridges (NavPress, 2018).
3. **Listen to:** "The Priority of Christian Fellowship," by John MacArthur, accessible at: https://www.gty.org/sermons/44-12/the-priority-of-christian-fellowship.
4. **Sing:** "Oh, How Good It Is" (#332 in *Hymns of Grace*).
5. **Pray and appropriate:** Ask the Lord for opportunities over the next two months to fellowship in a significant way with men (believers) who need spiritual encouragement. Then make a list of five men who fit this description, and implement a plan to spend a meaningful amount of time with you over the coming months.

Audio, video, and handouts for this session are available at www.gracechurch.org/motw.
Next meeting: November 4, 7pm – "*Ekklesia:* The Lord's Supper"