

**THE ENGAGING CHURCH:
(5) ENGAGED IN FELLOWSHIP**

Romans 12:5
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PROLOGUE

Reuben Welch, when he was a chaplain at Point Loma College (now called Point Loma Nazarene University), wrote a book entitled, “We Really Do Need Each Other”, in which he said:

“You see we really do need each other; not because of the inadequacies of God, but because this is the way His grace works...God has made us this way.”

PREFACE

In recent weeks we have been looking at what it means to be an Engaging Church. An Engaging Church is one that engages in what God is doing in the world. As we carry out this work we need to engage our hearts, our minds, our hands and feet. Today we shall consider how an Engaging Church engages in Fellowship.¹

SCRIPTURE

“So we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another (Rom 12:5 NRSV).

INTRODUCTION

You can summarize the story line of the entire Bible from Genesis to Revelation in just four words: GOD WANTS A FAMILY. God chose the family of Abraham and Sarah to be the means by which God gathers a larger family to himself. God is at work in the world gathering a people to himself. Those who are already part of the family of God have the privilege of sharing in the work. This work is described in Ephesians in this way:

_____ God decided in advance to adopt us into his own family by bringing us to himself through Jesus Christ (Eph 1:5 NLT).

The Church is the family of God. God wants to relate to us not just as individuals but also as a family. One of the chief metaphors in the New Testament for the Church is “body” as in the Body of Christ. Paul writes:

“So in Christ we who are many form one body, and each member belongs to all the others” (Rom 12:5 NIV).

A follower of Jesus Christ is not only committed to the person of Christ but also to the Body of Christ, which is the Church. A Christian without a church home is like an organ without a body or a child without a family. It is an unnatural state. The Bible says:

“You belong in God’s household with every other Christian” (Eph 2:19b LB).

The term for participating in the family of God is “fellowship.” God designed us for fellowship. There are benefits we cannot receive, there is growth we cannot experience, and

¹The New Testament Greek word for “member” is *melos* and refers to a living part of a body like an organ. The word that is often translated “fellowship” is *koinonia* and can refer to intimate communion, participation, and partnership.

work we cannot accomplish apart from fellowship with other believers. If we want to be an Engaging Church and engage in what God is doing in the world then we need to engage in fellowship.

1. WE WILL ENGAGE OUR HEARTS IN FELLOWSHIP

IF WE WANT TO BE AN ENGAGING CHURCH WE WILL ENGAGE OUR HEARTS IN FELLOWSHIP.

This means we need to learn to love each other like a family. Healthy families love each other in tangible ways. Luke says of the early Church:

"They were like family to each other" (Acts 2:42a CEV).

The earliest Christians were known for their willingness to share. Sometimes, though, this tangible expression of love was misunderstood by those who persecuted the Christians and twisted into something it was not, such as the vicious rumor that Christians participated in orgies. But rumors like that couldn't get started today, could they?

When Sandy and I were expecting our first child, I was the Associate Pastor of First Presbyterian Church of Fort Dodge, Iowa. Church members were generous in helping us get through the experience. Carol Kuhn, for example, loaned Sandy one of her maternity dresses. When Sandy was finished with it, she gave it to me to return. But on the particular Sunday that I was going to do so I could not find Carol before the service. Later, while I was at the lectern making the announcements, I spotted Carol in one of the pews near the front and without thinking I said, "Carol Kuhn, thank you so much for what you did. You can pick up your dress in my office." A stunned silence was followed by uproarious laughter!

Paul writes to the Christians in Rome:

"Be devoted to each other like a loving family" (Rom. 12:10 GW).

Peter says:

"Love your spiritual family!" (1 Pet. 2:17b MESSAGE).

Of course, God wants us to love everyone, but he is especially concerned that we learn to love members of our spiritual family. Our families on earth are wonderful gifts from God. But they are temporary and fragile. Eventually they come apart from separation, brokenness or (ultimately) death. But your spiritual family is going to last forever! We need to practice here on earth what we will be doing for eternity.

This requires commitment and discipline. But who among us possesses perfect discipline? No one! In order to wake up in the morning we have alarm clocks. In order to get projects done we have deadlines. In order to practice love and forgiveness God gave us each other. Take a look around the room and think about this: You are somebody's homework assignment!

I realize that loving and forgiving each other is not always easy. One of my favorite illustrations on this comes from Chuck Swindoll who has paraphrased the German philosopher Schopenhauer by saying that the challenge of Christians loving each other is like the dance of porcupines on a cold night. The colder it gets outside, the more they huddle together for warmth; but the closer they get to one another, the more they hurt one another with their sharp quills, and then they want to separate. But after they separate they grow cold and want to come back together. So it goes, back and forth like a dance. The lesson is clear: It can be

tough to love our fellow porcupines!

But if we do learn to love each other, in spite of our flaws and shortcomings, this can be a powerful witness to others. Jesus said:

“By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another” (John 13:35 NRSV).

The historian Tertullian wrote in the 2nd Century:

“It is our care for those in need, it is our practice of loving kindness, that identifies us in the eyes of all. Look, they say, these Christians how they love one another!”

With God’s help and our willingness to practice, this can also be said of the Christians of the 21st Century. We model God’s love by loving each other and carrying that love to the world.

2. WE WILL ENGAGE OUR MINDS IN FELLOWSHIP

IF WE WANT TO BE AN ENGAGING CHURCH WE WILL ENGAGE OUR MINDS IN FELLOWSHIP.

We need to think about the meaning of fellowship. Or rather, we need to unthink what we think is the meaning of fellowship. I tried to look up “unthink” in my dictionary but could not find it. But if there was such a word it would mean something like, “getting rid of an idea based on an illusion and replacing it with an idea based on reality.”

The idea in question is the idea of fellowship. Far too many Christians have an idealized view of Christian fellowship. They expect that Christians will always be loving, kind, generous, thoughtful, and never ever say anything that would hurt someone else. And if a group of Christians does not live up to these ideals then they feel justified in separating themselves from the group in order to find a group that does live up to their ideals. Of course, no such group exists on the planet. And the sooner they grasp this, the sooner they can experience real Christian fellowship.

Bishop Joseph McKinney has said:

“Anyone can love the ideal church. The challenge is to love the real one.”

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was a German pastor who was executed during WWII for opposing Hitler. Several of his writings have survived included a book entitled, “Life Together.” Bonhoeffer was convinced that it was impossible to be a follower of Jesus Christ apart from life in the fellowship of local believers. But he argued that it must be fellowship with real people who are Christians and not a dream team of believers. He writes:

“Innumerable times a whole Christian community has broken down because it had sprung from a wish dream. The serious Christian, set down for the first time in a Christian community, is likely to bring with him a very definite idea of what Christian life together should be and to try to realize it. But God’s grace speedily shatters such dreams. Just as surely as God desires to lead us to a knowledge of genuine Christian fellowship, so surely must we be overwhelmed by a great disillusionment with others, with Christians in general, and, if we are fortunate, with ourselves” (*Life Together*, pp. 26-29).

We are far from perfect and we need to own up to our shortcomings rather than make excuses. A TV weather reporter lost her job because her forecasts were never accurate. When, in an interview for another position, she was asked why she left her last job, she replied, "The climate didn't agree with me."

But Christ is looking for authenticity and not clever excuses. He wants real people with real needs. His Church is not meant to be a hall of fame for the super spiritual or some elite religious club for those who have met a list of snobbish requirements. The Church is rehab! It is rehab for broken souls, a hospital for sinners. Paul's journey is insightful on this:

"I'm not saying that I have this all together, that I have it made. But I am well on my way, reaching out for Christ, who has so wondrously reached out for me. Friends, don't get me wrong: By no means do I count myself an expert in all of this, but I've got my eye on the goal, where God is beckoning us onward—to Jesus" (Phil 3:12-14 MESSAGE).

3. WE WILL ENGAGE OUR HANDS AND FEET IN FELLOWSHIP

IF WE WANT TO BE AN ENGAGING CHURCH WE WILL ENGAGE OUR HANDS AND FEET IN FELLOWSHIP.

Our scripture text reminds us that as Christians we are members of the body of Christ and we belong to one another. The Christian life is not just a matter of believing. It is also a matter of belonging, and you and I must choose to belong. But did you ever get the impression that for some Christians, being with other believers is a low priority?

Four friends were playing a round of golf on Sunday morning. Their scores were terrible. On top of this it began to rain. The men returned to the clubhouse only to learn that the electrical power line had been hit by lightning, so the restaurant was closed. As the men prepared to rush for their cars, one of them remarked: "You know, we could have just as well gone to church this morning." Another of the men disagreed: "No, I couldn't have gone to church, anyway. My wife is terribly sick in bed."

Priorities. We must take the time and make the commitment to be involved with other Christians. We need each other to face the challenges and struggles of life and to learn how to love each other as Christ has loved us.

We also need each other to carry out Christ's work in the world. As members of Christ's body, we are his hands and feet. He works through us to minister to others. Eugene Peterson describes it this way:

"[God] creates each of us by Christ Jesus to join him in the work he does, the good work he has gotten ready for us to do, work we had better be doing" (Eph 2:10 MESSAGE).

Every member has a part to play. You may think you are only a "toe" but even a toe is vitally important. John MacArthur makes a point of this when talking about the baseball pitching legend Dizzy Dean whose career peaked in the 1930s. He writes:

"[Dean's] 1934 season has never been excelled by any pitcher in history. Dean won thirty games that year, a feat that hasn't been repeated since...But in the 1937 All-Star game, he took a hard line drive off his [big] toe, and the toe was broken. It should not have been a career-ending injury, but Dean was rushed back into the lineup before the fracture was completely healed, and he pitched

several games favoring the sore toe. That led to an unnatural delivery that seriously injured his pitching arm. The arm never fully recovered. Dizzy Dean's major-league career was essentially over in four years.

Something similar happens in any church where there are non-functioning members. The active members of the body become overextended, and the effectiveness of the whole body suffers greatly."

The Bible says:

"The whole Body is fitted together perfectly. As each part does its own special work, it helps the other parts grow, so that the whole Body is healthy and growing and full of love" (Eph. 4:16 NLT).

We need each other to carry out God's work in the world. None of us deserves the love of God and none of us deserves the privilege to be able to serve him. But by the grace of God and in spite of our shortcomings we have received both.

CONCLUSION

Coming together for fellowship is a vital part of God's plan for our lives. There are benefits we cannot receive, there is growth we cannot experience, and work we cannot accomplish apart from fellowship with other believers. As Reuben Welch said by the title of his best selling book, "*We Really Do Need Each Other.*"

POSTSCRIPT:

"You know something-
we're all just people who need each other.
We're all learning
and we've all got a long journey ahead of us.
We've got to go together
and if it takes us until Jesus comes
we better stay together
we better help each other.
And I dare say
that by the time we get there
all the sandwiches will be gone
and all the chocolate will be gone
and all the water will be gone
and all the backpacks will be empty.
But no matter how long it takes us
we've got to go together.
Because that's how it is
in the body of Christ.
It's all of us
in love
in care
in support
in mutuality
we really do need each other" - Welch.