

(New Wine in New Wineskins) 9. Sanctification and Fellowship

by Zac Poonen

The new covenant leads to inward sanctification and fellowship, which are inseparable and essential for building the church.

Scripture: John 17:21, Acts 2:42, 1 Corinthians 1:10, Ephesians 4:3, 1 Peter 3:8

Topics: "Sanctification", "Fellowship"

Description

Zac Poonen preaches on the importance of fellowship in the new covenant, emphasizing that it is patterned after the fellowship between Jesus and the Father. Under the new covenant, inward sanctification leads to true fellowship among believers, unlike the loneliness experienced by many in the Old Testament. The sermon highlights the necessity of sanctification and fellowship going hand in hand, warning against imitating others' ministries and stressing the need for unity in diversity within the body of Christ.

Transcript

The word 'fellowship' is a new covenant word. The fellowship spoken of in the new covenant is patterned after the fellowship that Jesus and the Father had with each other during Jesus' earthly days. Jesus' prayer was that the fellowship among His disciples would be of the same order.

Under the old covenant, although people could rise to great heights of holiness, yet they could come into fellowship with each other. There were godly men under the old covenant - Moses, Elijah, Daniel and John the Baptist, to name but a few. These men had a holiness that exceeded the holiness of most of today's believers. But that is because most of today's believers have not entered into the new covenant.

The new covenant leads the disciples of Jesus into an inward sanctification, that in turn leads to fellowship one with another. When we read of the great men of faith in Hebrews 11, we see that they were all lonely individuals. This is how it was in Old Testament times. But as soon as we turn to the New Testament, we find Jesus sending out His disciples two by two. This was something new. Jesus came not only to lead us to an inward sanctification but also to fellowship.

If a believer comes to a life of victory over sin inwardly, and yet does not come into fellowship with others, there is something drastically lacking in his sanctification. Sanctification without fellowship is a deception.

Many are travelling around the world today, preaching holiness; but they themselves are lonely individuals like those in Old Testament times. Such preachers are still under the old covenant. Invariably it will be seen that they have not built any fellowship in the place that they reside.

But it was not so with the apostles in the first century. Soon after the day of Pentecost, we read of Peter and John going out together. Peter told the lame man in the temple to look at both John and himself (Acts 3:4). Peter and John worked as a team. On the day of Pentecost, even though it was Peter who preached, yet we read that he stood up with the eleven (Acts 2:14). Fellowship is the one thing that stands out when we read Acts chapters 2 to 4.

Peter and John were not men of similar temperament. They were vastly different as human beings. Peter was the quick and active type - quick to boast that he would never deny the Lord, quick to jump into the sea of Galilee, as soon as he saw the Lord by the shore (John 21), etc. John, on the other hand, was the quiet meditative type who loved to be alone and to see visions of heavenly things (as at Patmos). God always brings together people who are dissimilar (humanly speaking), in the church - so that He can demonstrate a unity in diversity that is far more glorious than the unity of two similar people becoming one.

In Acts 13:2, we read of the leaders of the church in Antioch fasting and worshipping the Lord, seeking His direction. The Holy Spirit then spoke to them to separate Saul and Barnabas for His service. Notice again, that unlike Old Testament times, the Spirit called two people and not one. This was the new covenant age and there was no place now for an individualistic ministry. There had to be an expression of Christ's body - and for this, a minimum of two people were required.

Here again the Spirit called two people of dissimilar temperaments to work together. Paul was a strict, uncompromising man who would not tolerate any halfheartedness in anyone. In Acts 15:36-39, when Paul and Barnabas had a discussion concerning asking Mark to accompany them on their second journey. Paul would have none of it, because Mark had left them half way through their first journey. Barnabas, (who was given that name because he had such an outstanding ministry of encouragement - Acts 4:36) on the other hand, wanted to give Mark one more chance. Paul and Barnabas stuck so much to their own view points on this issue that they separated from each other. Obviously, they were both still very strong-willed and had not yet come (in their own spiritual development) to the place where they had acquired the wisdom from above that is 'willing to yield' (James 3:17).

The apostles were not ready-made saints. They too had to develop like all of us - and get light on their flesh, little by little. Later on Paul, Barnabas and Mark came into a glorious fellowship with each other (as is evident from 2 Timothy 4:11).

Paul and Barnabas had dissimilar temperaments. The Holy Spirit had called them together. Yet they did not know how to get along with each other. This is the condition with many believers even today. Such a condition is tolerable among the immature. But what shall we say when we see such a condition existing even among those who have been believers for over ten years. That is pathetic, to say the least.

Paul majored on 'truth'. Barnabas majored on 'grace'. If each had seen and appreciated the need for the other, the glory of God could have been seen in them, full of grace and truth (John 1:14). Together they could have produced something that neither of them could have done individually. This is why the Holy Spirit called them together. If a church had only the ministry of a man like the young Paul, everyone would have been driven out, and only Paul would have been left! If, on the other hand, it had only the ministry of a man like the young Barnabas, it may have ended up as a jellyfish-like organisation without backbone,

and full of halfhearted compromisers. But together, Paul and Barnabas could have built the true church. This is what Satan did not permit them to see in Acts 15. Thank God that they saw it later.

When Barnabas left Paul, the Holy Spirit prepared another co-worker for Paul. We read of this person immediately after the Acts 15 incident, in Acts 16:1 - Timothy. The Spirit was not going to let Paul minister alone. He prepared a co-worker for him, who again, was temperamentally the exact opposite of Paul. Timothy was a shy, retiring, timid type of person - an introvert, in contrast to Paul the extrovert. They were both totally alike in their devotion to the Lord, in their wholeheartedness, and in their freedom from 'seeking their own' (Philippians 2:19-21). But they were poles apart temperamentally. Yet Paul grew to appreciate Timothy more than any of his other co-workers. They had glorious fellowship together, despite their different temperaments. At last the Holy Spirit was able to accomplish what He wanted to, in Paul.

It is folly to imitate the ministry of another - for then one's own ministry in the body is hindered. This is the folly of many young people. They admire the ministry of some men of God and try to imitate it, without having the same calling themselves. As a result, they drown in a sea of carnality and souliness. In Hebrews 11:29 we are told that while the Israelites could cross the Red Sea without any difficulty, because God had called them to do so, the Egyptians drowned in it, because they tried to imitate the Israelites. This is a warning to all who try to imitate the ministry of others.

Consider a few examples: Very few are called to a ministry like Jeremiah's, of plucking up, breaking down, destroying and overthrowing (Jeremiah 1:10). One without that calling, who tries to imitate that, can destroy not only his own unique God-given ministry in the body, but his soul as well. In the same way, we are also warned not to become teachers (James 3:1). Those who are specifically called by God to be teachers in the church (1 Corinthians 12:29; Ephesians 4:11) will have the grace to fulfil their ministry triumphantly. Others who imitate them will not only be drowned themselves but may also succeed in drowning others in a sea of confusion and wrong teaching.

The new covenant is meant to lead people into the body of Christ. There was no 'body' in the old covenant. This was because the Holy Spirit did not indwell men then. Therefore it was impossible for any two people to come into fellowship with each other. Under the old covenant, they were 'human' in their behaviour; and therefore, it was impossible to have fellowship. Under the new covenant, we are to be 'divine' in our behaviour, because we can now partake of the divine nature (2 Peter 1:4). Thus fellowship becomes gloriously possible, and the body can be built.

When people living in this day and age, still cannot come into fellowship with each other, it is obvious that they are still carnal, babes and 'human'. Paul reproved the Christians at Corinth for this, saying, "You are still fleshlyAre you not walking like mere men?" (1 Corinthians 3:3). When people are 'human' they seek to join together with people who are similar to them. The Malayalees will join together to form a church of their own, the Anglo-Indians will form another and the Tamilians yet another. These are clubs, and not the church of Jesus Christ!

The way God has planned the body, however, He has placed people of different backgrounds, communities, nationalities, temperaments, intellectual abilities, social and financial levels all together, so that through fellowship one with another, each one's rough edges can be rubbed off. Thus there is a simultaneous development of both sanctification and fellowship.

In Hebrews 12:4 we are told to pursue after fellowship ('peace with all men') and sanctification. These two cannot be separated in the new covenant. They are like our two feet. If we put our left foot forward when

walking, then we have to put our right foot forward for the next step. It must be thus with sanctification and fellowship. Very often, we find believers who are gripped by the message of sanctification who are not at all gripped by the necessity of fellowship. They are like people who have one lame leg and who are trying to hop forward with just one leg - sanctification. They are interested in cleansing themselves of impurity in thought, word and deed and perhaps even in attitude and motive. But they do not seem to value or cultivate fellowship with others in the body. We can then say that their pursuit of sanctification is a selfish pursuit that will finally lead them to the wrong destination - for holiness without fellowship is a counterfeit. We must never forget this.

There may be also some cases which are the opposite, where people seek for fellowship, but do not pursue after sanctification in their private lives. Such fellowship, without sanctification, is also a counterfeit.

Both our legs must be strong if we are to walk forward properly. In the previous verse (Hebrews 12:12, 13), we are told to strengthen that particular limb that is lame (whichever it is), so that it is healed. Here is where all of us can profitably ask for God's light so that we can examine ourselves and judge ourselves rightly.

The oneness that we are to have is to be like the oneness that Jesus had with the Father during His earthly life. It was a oneness in spirit. The Father, Son and Holy Spirit, all exercise different ministries in our redemption. The Father sent the Son. The Son took a body and died for our sins. The Holy Spirit now works within us to make us like the Son. There is no confusion in these ministries. Yet all three are perfectly one. It must be thus in the church too.

God, in His sovereignty, has given a particular ministry to each and every member in the body of Christ (1 Corinthians 12:7, 8). We could say that God has drawn a circle around each person. In some cases the circle is very large and in some cases it is very small (Matthew 25:15). Within your own circle, you can find God (Acts 17:26, 27). Outside your circle, you can only destroy yourself, by being a busybody in other people's matters. Peter says that instead of suffering as a busybody in other people's matters, we should judge ourselves and suffer in our own flesh (1 Peter 4:15, 17 & 1).

For example: How another brother brings up his children or spends his money, is really none of our business. That is outside our circle. God has given us no authority in another's circle. Therefore we should take heed only to ourselves (1 Timothy 4:16).

When we were in the world, we could say that we had made a very large circle for ourselves that involved having opinions about many people and many matters. But now we must be careful to stay within the circle that God has drawn around us as individuals. In most cases, that is a circle that contains only one person - yourself! If you are a parent, the circle will take in your family as well. If you are an elder in a church, the circle will take in those in your church. But in almost all other cases, each person has to judge only himself.

It is when we transgress and go beyond the boundaries of our own circle that fellowship with others is destroyed; and our own sanctification is hindered as well.

We are commanded to "be subject to one another in the fear of Christ" (Ephesians 5:21). This means that the fear of Christ should make us afraid to tread into another's circle. We will restrain ourselves in our fellowship with each other, so as not to be a busybody in matters that do not concern us.

Curiosity is a deadly but undetected sin in the lives of many believers. This is one of the earliest manifestations of being a busybody in other people's matters. Children are usually curious to eavesdrop and listen in on the conversations of others. Paul said, "When I became a man, I put away childish things" (1 Corinthians 13:11). But most believers do not put away this evil habit even after growing up. Such curiosity finally leads them to the still more evil habit of gossiping. Those who practise this habit, that is characteristic of old women, will find that they are unable to discipline themselves to lead a godly life (See 1 Timothy 4:7). Pornography also is but Satan's way of satisfying the evil curiosity in the flesh to see the naked bodies of others.

Jesus was tempted like us to be curious too. But He steadfastly refused to go outside the circle that His Father had drawn around Him. Thus He never sinned even once in this area in His 33½ years on earth. When we see how weak we are in this area of curiosity, we can understand what a mighty accomplishment Jesus' victory was in this area alone. To be curious to know who is getting married to whom, and who is going to have a baby next, etc., is the pastime of ungodly people. No wholehearted brother or sister will ever engage in such a pastime.

Going beyond the boundaries of one's circle can also be seen in the way some elders, husbands and parents lord it over those who are to be subject to them. We must never terrify our children or put a pressure on our wife or on the other brothers in the church, in any way. The words of Elihu are very fitting here, "No fear of me should terrify you, nor should my pressure weigh heavily on you" (Job 33:7).

Each of us should be careful to ensure that those who are under our authority in any way (children, wife, servants, believers, etc.) never feel terrified or pressurised or threatened. It is very easy to go beyond our boundaries when we have power over others. Then fellowship is destroyed.

A husband can so dominate his wife, as to crush her personality. This is foolish. God has made a husband and wife different from each other, so that each can be a help to the other. In viewing any issue, you as a husband may view it from one angle, and your wife from another. That would be like your taking a photograph of a building from the north side and your wife taking a picture of the same building from the south side. When the two pictures are laid side by side, they may look completely different. But only thus do you get a complete view of the building. You would be a foolish husband then, if you demolished your wife's individuality, so as to make her take every photograph from your viewpoint alone! The loss will then be yours. If you had allowed her to be herself, you could have obtained another view of the matter that would have enlarged your own understanding of it, and made you wiser. Here is where many a husband has to cleanse himself of his folly.

Sanctification and fellowship belong inseparably together.

One step forward with the left leg of sanctification should be followed by the right leg of fellowship - in every relationship, whether of husband and wife, brother and brother, or sister and sister.

Those who walk in the light of God (1 John 1:7) will use both feet to walk. Thus they will get increasing light on the evil that dwells in their own flesh; and in judging and cleansing themselves there, they will find that their fellowship with others who are walking the same way also becomes more and more glorious. Thus the church will radiate the glory of Christ to the world around.

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