

ESSENTIAL CHURCH, PART 11: GRAVITATIONAL FELLOWSHIP

1 Corinthians 1:2; 3 John 9-10; 1 Peter 3:8-9 (NASB)

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Years ago I had the privilege of studying with the C. S. Lewis Summer Institute at Oxford and Cambridge Universities in Great Britain. That year the theme was *God in Time and Eternity* and it ran concurrently with an academic symposium on science and faith. The speakers consisted of some of the finest Christian minds in the areas of pure science, philosophy, theology, and apologetics. The Institute attracts Christians of many backgrounds and views on every conceivable subject, and yet we worshiped together several times a day.

As one of the speakers was progressing through his presentation he strayed for a moment into personal commentary. He said, in effect: "The people who hold the opposite view from my own, though they may be both Christians and scientists, are not worthy of participation in this discussion. You should simply ignore them completely." It was a sour note in an otherwise stimulating presentation.

At supper I was sitting next to an eminent physician who was also involved in research, education, and the leadership of his denomination. I remarked that I had an issue with that one particular remark the speaker made. He immediately thought I was speaking against the position the speaker advocated on the intersection of science and faith. He began to defend the speaker's position from the scientific angle based on his own research. He may have been right or wrong. I'm not sure I am smart enough to evaluate what he was saying.

But I stopped him after a bit because I had no interest in debating the underlying issue. I said that I was referring only to the personal commentary the speaker had interjected. I said to him: "That part, sir, was not science." He said nothing but from his facial expression I concluded that he had conceded the point. And, as I later thought, that attempt to exclude people and their views was also not theology or philosophy. It was pure factionalism.

Lest we judge our brother harshly for wanting to exclude some people and views from participating in that conversation, we should remember that the church has always struggled with the temptation to add human standards for fellowship. It may very well be impossible to avoid them completely, but an essential church keeps them to a minimum.

This was the goal of Dr. Albert Simpson, the founder of The Christian and Missionary Alliance. He began the movement with the goal of providing teaching, fellowship, and outreach opportunities which would not conflict with existing churches. But inevitably, as hundreds and thousands began to receive Christ, there came a need to organize some churches. And Simpson endeavored to build into the Alliance a dynamic which was not about the building of fences and policing them.

He believed that much energy was wasted on dividing over our human differences which should have been used for direct outreach activities. He wrote: "The Church of Jesus Christ has a divine pattern and should in every particular be constructed accordingly. ...The failure to do this...is the reason that the...world is still lying in darkness..." (*All for Jesus*, Camp Hill: Christian Publications, 1986, p. 51

conflated).

And he explained this pattern with the following words: "...I left my church to form a church for the people of all classes based on absolute freedom" (p. 51). He had a vision of people of all different racial, economic, educational, social, and even denominational backgrounds worshipping together and joining forces to spread the good news of Christ. This was a revolutionary idea. Such a body of believers would be held together not by human affinities but by a gravitational attraction to the Lord Jesus Christ. When the time came to write the brief founding articles for this new church, the historians record that "Giving testimony to faith in Christ and demonstrating a life consistent with that profession formed the only conditions of membership" (p.53). Thus the DNA of gravitational fellowship rather than a fellowship held together by a fence was encoded in the first church of The Christian and Missionary Alliance.

THE BASIS OF GRAVITATIONAL FELLOWSHIP

It is all well and good to say that this was Simpson's Big Idea and that it has worked. There are millions of Alliance-affiliated believers in over seventy countries. But was he right to say that this pattern is what God desires to establish in his church?

The start to answering that question is to notice that there is no single, comprehensive statement of faith in the New Testament. How is it possible for the early church to have "turned the world upside down" without such a document? Why, if theology and ministry practice are so important did God spread this information throughout narrative, philosophical, poetical, and apocalyptic literature? How could the early church have even held together without such a document?

Paul wrote the answer in the greeting of his first letter to the Corinthians: **"To the church of God which is at Corinth, to those who have been sanctified in Christ Jesus, saints by calling, with all who in every place call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, their Lord and ours..."** (1 Corinthians 1:2). This divinely-inspired description was the antidote to the rampant factionalism in that church—if they would receive it.

We learn from the apostle that believers are in **"the church of God."** This distinguishes us from all other assemblies. It means that our identity is his to make because we belong to him. Further, we have been **"sanctified in Christ Jesus,"** meaning that we are set apart as a fellowship from all the others by our connection to Jesus Christ. Everything we are is for him, and that includes believers as individuals as well as churches.

We are also called by God to be holy. Those in fellowship in Christ have been marked by the imputation of Christ's righteousness as a gift. Unholy people become positionally holy solely by the work of God. Such people give strong evidence of having heard the call by living holy lives in accord with their new nature in him. Conversely, if there is no holy living there is no new nature.

Our fellowship is explicitly said to be **"with all who in every place call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, their Lord and ours..."** Notice carefully that no believing people from any place are excluded from this fellowship. This visible body of diverse people is marked by calling on the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, meaning that we gather to pray and worship as a pattern of life centered on

him. This is not just a set of external religious observances but the fruit of a personal relationship.

Finally, we know him together as Savior, Lord, and God. We are not merely meeting with humans and we are not just talking about Christ. We have a real connection which binds us together. He is our only hope of salvation and the Lord who guides us every part of every day.

These few simple divine characteristics of the fellowship of believers supersede all merely human differences. We are owned by God, redeemed by Christ, in pursuit of holy living, and worshiping and serving Christ together across all human boundaries. The power of our connection is Christ himself, the way a star holds planets captive in orbit by an unthinkably large gravitational force.

WHAT FENCED FELLOWSHIP LOOKS LIKE

The Apostle John tells us about a particularly bad example of fenced fellowship to show us the contrast with gravitational fellowship. He wrote: "**I wrote something to the church; but Diotrephes, who loves to be first among them, does not accept what we say. For this reason, if I come, I will call attention to his deeds which he does, unjustly accusing us with wicked words; and not satisfied with this, he himself does not receive the brethren, either, and he forbids those who desire to do so and puts them out of the church**" (3 John 1:9-10). Diotrephes, in a startling display of audacity, had fenced out the Apostles and by definition their teaching.

His method was by trash talking, as the expression goes. We don't know what he said, but he painted the holy Apostles as Big Stinky Dogs. Who wants to associate with Big Stinky Dogs? Once he successfully planted the poison, the accusations did the work. A. B. Simpson studiously avoided any put downs of other churches, groups, theological positions, or fellow-believers. So should we.

The fenced fellowship method is again seen by Diotrephes' refusal to welcome other believers—those whom God made to be family in Christ! The term brethren is, of course, the generic term for brothers and sisters. He went beyond blocking them himself to forbidding others from following the Lord in welcoming the brethren. And to complete this dastardly act of fence-building, he disfellowshipped anyone who persisted in welcoming God's family. Let me say to you, my brothers and sisters, that it would be a badge of honor to be ejected from a church like that!

We do not know Diotrephes' reasoning. But Christians have accepted the idea of fenced fellowship for thousands of years on the smallest of distinctions of belief, culture, habit, and human preference. In a fenced fellowship, the Calvinists eject the Arminians, the pentecostals eject the cessationists, the different stripes of creationists eject one another, the hymn singers eject the rockers, and the various eschatological camps fracture into tiny shards. And so on, *ad absurdum*. All of these rejections have also been done in reverse.

Can you see how unsafe it is to be in a fellowship based on human fences? What if the humans change their mind about the definition of their fences? We might suddenly be on the outs. I was once sent by the District Superintendent to seek reconciliation among factions in a local church. The pastor had erected a fence based on ministry methods, the congregation had promptly divided, and then they all went to war. The end result, in spite of my prayers and admonitions, was that both sides quit the church because it became clear that neither side could win. And to my great surprise, you know who else left

the church? A group of people who had not taken sides but who did not want to be part of a church which was a battleground defined by a fence.

Where, in the middle of all this, did the gravitational attraction of Christ go? It was superseded by human factors, and the truly essential principal of fellowship in Christ was lost. The Alliance as a whole, and our local church, has the principle of gravitational fellowship built into our DNA—if we can keep it.

Take for example, the question of whether spiritual gifts are for today, which ones are operative, and what they look like. Cessationists take the position that the sign gifts concluded at the end of the apostolic era. Others—called continuationists by the cessationists—believe that all of the gifts are for today. The Christian and Missionary Alliance was forged in a time when people with these differing views were in fellowship together. Then came the Azusa Street Revival in the early 1900's, among other influences, and a subgroup of the fellowship began to believe that the sign of speaking in tongues was the necessary sign of the baptism in the Holy Spirit. Simpson fought this fence mightily in pursuit of the gravitational fellowship which he believed would propel the missionary work—and failed. Some sixty percent of the Alliance fellowship agreed with the doctrine that no one who does not speak in tongues has the Holy Spirit. They left and formed their own denomination.

Simpson developed a response marked by the motto: "seek not, forbid not." It meant that believers should not seek spiritual gifts for their own sake, but also should not forbid the practice of any the gifts. It was an attempt to preserve the essential characteristic of a gravitational fellowship. We now prefer as a denomination to encourage people to have an expectancy for God to work through spiritual gifts in any way he may choose. We still have not issued an opinion on cessationism versus continuationism. We have not issued a policy on creationism, predestination, the timing of the rapture, or many other things. All because our essential fellowship is in Christ and the great central truths of our redemption. We seek not to build fences.

If you study church history you will see that no comprehensive statement of faith was necessary to propel the early church. And the early church councils were all primarily about the identity of Christ and the nature of his work in the believer—about the gravitational center. Although these councils produced statements, they still did not produce a complete statement of faith. I conclude therefore, as did A. B. Simpson, that gravitational fellowship is crucial to an essential church.

THE PRACTICE OF GRAVITATIONAL FELLOWSHIP

So how does this work in practice? The nature of gravitational fellowship commits us to work out differences through healthy conversation and debate while maintaining cordial fellowship. We will discover that no perfect agreement is achievable. It is much less comfortable than fenced fellowship where we simply do away with differences by telling people to change their view, shut up, or go away.

The New Testament is rich with guidance about how to conduct a fellowship which is held together by the power of Christ rather than affinities based on human preference. Since we have already heard from Paul and John, let us also hear from the apostle Peter, who wrote: **"To sum up, all of you be harmonious, sympathetic, brotherly, kindhearted, and humble in spirit; not returning evil for evil or insult for insult, but giving a blessing instead; for you were called for the very purpose that you**

might inherit a blessing" (1 Peter 3:8-9).

We are all called, without exception, to harmony which in Greek is "one mind." That unity of spirit is not the same as perfect agreement on all questions. Our calling is to accept one another because of Christ. The "one mind" is the mind which exalts him above every merely human thing. No one gets to say, for example: "Well, I work in apologetics, so I get to be abrasive," or "I have a prophetic ministry which consists mostly of condemning people."

We are called to have sympathy for one another, which literally means "to feel with" them. It is also translated as "compassion." There is no exclusionary thought in the Bible such as: *As long as they disagree with you, no compassion is required.* Brotherly love is essential. It is a *sine qua non*. We never get to treat any believing person as if he or she is not a member of the family of God. Throw in kind-heartedness, humility of spirit, and an unwillingness to hit back when someone hits us. Instead we give a blessing. Why? Because that is God's sovereign purpose for us in Christ. Let us never be found in the camp of blessing-stealers, grace-robbers, and peace-wreckers! There will be enough natural difficulties in a ruined world living among the sinners and recovering sinners. Let us not add to the sorrow!

Gravitational fellowship is not just desirable. It is not just effective for outreach. It is the sovereign purpose of Christ for us. It is the nature of an essential church to weather the human differences in light of "**the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus [our] Lord,**" as Paul wrote (Phil 3:8).

We have a doctrinal statement as a local church and denomination which is designed to establish the truth of Christ as the gravitational center of our fellowship. Beyond that, the pastors and elders have the task of making wise judgments about all matters of doctrine and practice in light of Scripture. But what they should not do is create a fence which is designed to hold us together. Only Christ can hold us together.

And if we are not devastated by the awareness of our own sin, if we are not humbled by the sacrifice of Christ to redeem us, then certainly no fence can hold us together. Hipness or skepticism or orthopraxy or lengthy doctrinal statements may serve to hold us for a time, but nothing of human fabrication will work in the long run.

I conclude with this admonishment from the Apostle Paul: "**Now may the God who gives perseverance and encouragement grant you to be of the same mind with one another according to Christ Jesus, so that with one accord you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore, accept one another, just as Christ also accepted us to the glory of God**" (Romans 15:5-7).

May the glory of God be seen in our fellowship!