

Celebrating Christian Community

One of the most impressive creative works of God in the world today is the community of Christian believers. Distributed across the face of the globe, in some places free and highly visible, in others persecuted and completely out of sight, the universal church gives witness to the power of God and the reality of Jesus in the world after 2000 years of turbulent history. Jesus said, "I will build my church" (Matthew 16: 18).

Christians are everywhere

It has been my joy over many years to meet Christians from all walks of life, in different parts of the world, and to celebrate the diversity and vibrancy of what the Bible refers to as the "Body of Christ" (1 Corinthians 12:27; Ephesians 1:22-24). We are His presence in the world. There is no human organisation that even comes near to approximating the mystical, supernatural corpus we know as the Christian community. I never cease to be amazed how easy it is to connect with genuine Christians on first meeting them, not because we necessarily share ethnic identity, social status, physical characteristics or even a structured organisational "unity". Nor because the people I encounter have social skills others do not possess. The unique relationship experienced between Christians is generated by the Holy Spirit. The church of which He is the CEO is bigger than any of us imagines.

The New Testament church was born a little over seventy days after the ascension of the risen Christ to the right hand of God, when thousands of men and women from all over the then Jewish Diaspora were converted on the Jewish Day of Pentecost (read the account in Acts Chapter 2). Starting its life as a sect of Judaism, the Christian community quickly spread out and embraced people of many different cultures. As it did so, communities of interest coalesced around shared identities, languages and backgrounds. The ministry of the apostles was not unduly affected by this development. For the sake of operational convenience, Peter and their co-workers and Paul agreed to function as apostles to the Jews and Gentiles respectively (Galatians 2:9). At the end of the day, neither side ceased to be part of "one body" in Christ, simply because they had elected (or been led by the Holy Spirit) to operate on different "playing fields". The same Lord was at work in each of them.

Times have changed. Today, there are thousands of denominations in Christendom. Many of them are only different in terms of name or governmental structure. Others are mortal foes and their "testimony" has been to sin and selfishness rather than to Jesus Christ. In the midst of all this man-made diversity stand genuine Christians who recognise one another when they meet and know the value of fellowship.

What is fellowship?

The word “fellowship” (my father used to say it meant “fellows on the one ship, a word picture that made sense) is widely used in the secular community.

I was once asked to be guest of honour at a major anniversary of Rotary International chapter overseas. I am not a Rotarian, but circumstances created the opportunity and I celebrated the event with my new friends. The focus of the evening was the great work undertaken by the chapter in improving the circumstances of people in the community. These people had something in common. They shared goals and identities and spoke repeatedly about their “fellowship”. If they met Rotarians in other parts of the world, they celebrated the organisation and its universal goals.

Likewise, a billion Muslims celebrate the “Umma”, the international community of believers that prays around the clock, like a global “Mexican wave” of prayer calls and responses continually moving around the world. Ramadan, the Muslim month of fasting and feasting, is a unique event that commemorates key events in the history of Islam, drawing together Muslim men and women in a sense of purpose and commitment.

“Fellowship” is a natural response to man as a social being. If you watch Jews praying at the “Wailing Wall” in Jerusalem there is an aura of community at prayer. (The Wailing Wall is a retaining wall of the Second Temple compound, destroyed by the Romans in AD70. Today it is also part of the disputed hilltop that Jews call the Temple Mount and Muslims call Haram al-Sharif.) “Community” is implicit in celebrations of Passover, Yom Kippur, Hannukah and other Jewish feasts around the world. Many cultures and religions celebrate global community. Communism attempts to force unity and uniformity by fostering notions of an internal utopia and external enemies.

So, what's the difference?

In Christian circles the celebration of “fellowship” can be confused with sitting in a church building looking at the back of someone else’s head, having a casual drink and conversation or a meal together, or listening to a Christian message. Curiously, we often say we have “fellowship” when we are in a church program situation, but don’t use the term when we meet with some of the same people socially.

The operative New Testament word is “koinonia”, which implies “having in common”. It appears seventeen times in the New Testament. The first Christians shared their material possessions and often lived together or in close community (Acts 4:34-35). Becoming a Christian was described as being “added to the church” (Acts 2:47). They worshipped together. On one level, it made sense for them to support one another, because they were opposed and vilified by non-Christians. But this was not the reason they operated in a spirit of “koinonia”. Christians who travelled could be accepted by communities hundreds or thousands of kilometres away on the strength of a letter of recommendation from their home church. What made them one was the work of Christ in their hearts. Even when their leaders differed on points of structure, they still considered themselves one. Poor Christians in

Jerusalem found Christian groups in Greek communities taking up offerings and sending them financial assistance. What they had was trans-cultural, bigger than religious expression or the forced political and legal unity of *Pax Romans* (the Roman Peace), which held the known world under a common framework.

Their unity was an expression of Christ. Jesus prayed they would be one, as he and the Father were one (John 17:21). Their leaders stressed the importance of unity, of understating the fact that they were all different, had diverse backgrounds and skills, but were still part of “one” body. They complemented one another. Whether or not they were aware of one another, or had even met, they sensed oneness with Christian believers in other parts of the empire. Christians today can empathise with, and intercede for, Christians they have never met in places they will probably never see, knowing they are part of the same Body. “If one suffers, all suffer” (1 Corinthians 12:26). The unity we have is solely because of Christ; if we are in fellowship with Him, we are related to others who share that relationship (1 John 1:3). This gives us the capacity to rise above social, racial, political and cultural differences. *Koinonia* is not about us, it is about Christ and the abundant life we share in Him. The Bible says that where brethren dwell together in unity God commands a blessing (Psalm 133).

Biblical fellowship explained

Jesus called his first disciples to live with him. Biblical fellowship is not ecumenism. It is not a structural entity. It is ironic but true that many attempts at ecumenism end up contributing to division. Fellowship is an expression of Christ, a community of God’s people that engenders unity. Does this mean we should sell the sanctuaries where we meet to worship, pray and grow in our Biblical knowledge? Not necessarily, however it is worth considering how much more effective we might be if our resources were able to be shared and surpluses used to building the Kingdom of God.

There are many valid reasons not to insist on slavishly adopting other peoples’ models, even models adopted by the Jerusalem church. There the believers had everything in common and there was no sense of private ownership. There is no evidence this format was adopted by churches established and operating elsewhere at the same time, so we cannot be legalistic about precedents.

Why do Christians need to gather together anyway? Who needs more social commitments eating into his or her valuable time? The answer lies in a letter written to a group of Hebrew Christians in New Testament days. The letter encouraged them to meet regularly, for mutual edification (or building up). Responding to a growing trend to neglect such meetings, the writer warned his readers not to neglect gathering together but to use every opportunity they had to encourage one another (Hebrews 10:25).

Which denomination is best? Few young people in the West remain tied to the denominational franchise model of church. Denominations (some a

perhaps more akin to “demonations”) are simply the way we organise ourselves to serve God. As human creations they are fraught with human weaknesses, but we can usually tolerate them as places we can gather to worship and serve God corporately. It is important that the “place” we meet with other Christians be real and that it be Bible-based and Jesus-centred, focusing on Christian growth and witness, while not claiming to be exclusive.

The house church “movement” is predicated on a healthy desire for simple Christian living, unencumbered by structures, synods, constitutions and offices. What often happens, in practice, is that house churches simply become microcosms of denominations. Someone has to take charge, to lead, to make decisions. (Otherwise autonomy becomes anarchy.) A sense of exclusiveness often marks such attempts; the successful small group usually does not remain small and growth generates the need for organisation and direction.

We need to recapture community, with shared purpose, shared equality (but recognising different functions) and shared ultimate vision. Community where Christians share spiritual gifts, character development, healing, prayer, teaching, worship, characterised by generosity, support, understanding in times of relationship breakdown, bereavement or disappointment, career planning and the discovery and use of abilities and gifts, If we force the reconstruction of community to fit pre-designed models it can simply be a result of the “flesh”.

Changing formats

Christian formation and attendance patterns are changing. Discipleship courses are available, however not all of them are in “church”. In a bizarre twist, it is now possible to complete such courses by distance participation. Founder of the Methodist Church English clergyman John Wesley built a “class” system to skill new converts. He believed it was necessary to bring people together physically to teach them Christian truth and emphasised the value of inclusive relationships with other believers. Home Groups (action groups, growth cells, call them what you will) can be part of the church’s backbone, but only if relevant, inclusive, functional, flexible and attractive. Fellowship needs to promote personal growth through learning, belonging and involvement. It must stand for connectedness, participation, communication, comradeship and shared experiences. It must have an active concern for those on the fringe of church life and a meaningful regime care for Christian young people and the unique problems they face.

Australians continue to search for meaningful community, to which they can belong, where they can find identity and security, makes sense intellectually and speaks to them holistically. For many people the church provides an important sense of community, purpose and belonging.

The importance of fellowship in integrating new people into a meaningful church community needs to be recognised. Programs cannot replace personal contact and connections.

The impact of individualism

Western culture today is increasingly characterised by “rugged individualism”. Individualistic pursuit is prized in sport, the arts, career, education, politics and wealth. This expression is endemic throughout the Christian community as well. When people make decisions to follow Christ, they usually do so as individuals (other cultures would do so at family or even community level). As a result, church attendance has become a form. We know very little about Christians attending our own churches. Think of Christians you know. You may talk about unity, perhaps even hang out in a home group or Bible study. But how well do you know them? Who are the key people in their lives? What is the nature of their work? What is their family history? What are their passions, their likes, dislikes, their greatest joys and aches. What is their world view or philosophy? What are they going through right now? Do you know? Do you care? Or do you shrug your shoulders and sigh, “God, I’m not responsible for him”. That’s what Cain said about his brother Abel (after he murdered him and hid his body in the ground). Someone has said that every person is linked to the rest of the world through a chain of only six people. However, our rugged individualism has isolated us from people we attend church with each week.

Let’s rediscover community and fellowship, without borders and without denominational demarcation. Let’s make a decision to grow together and support other parts of the Body of Christ. As our secular communities become fragmented, let’s offer a Christian faith that is relevant and powerful because it is built on relationship rooted in Jesus Christ.