



## Lesson 5

# Together on the Journey Relationships in the Church

Up to this point we have reviewed many aspects of the Christian life that we typically think of as involving our personal relationship with God: our response to the gospel, our growth in godliness, our love for doctrine, and our empowerment by God's Spirit. While all of these things are critical for our personal lives, it is possible to understand them, incorrectly, as involving *only* our personal lives. In this lesson, we examine a key assumption of New Testament teaching: all of these things—indeed, all of the Christian life—take place in the context of our relationships with other believers in the context of the local church.

Although we enter into a relationship with God as individuals, we nevertheless enter into something greater than our own individuality: the church—the community of God's people. We will find that, besides being woven into the very fabric of the Christian life, our relationships with other believers are a tremendous means of blessing, both for ourselves and others. God never meant for us to live the Christian life alone. Instead, He gives us the marvelous privilege of traveling on this journey *together*.

## I. The Foundation of our Fellowship: God's Community

To fully appreciate our identity as God's people, we have to recognize where in the unfolding drama of God's redemptive purposes we stand.

- A. Throughout the history of redemption, God has been acting to create "a people for His own possession" (1 Peter 2:9).
1. God promised Abraham that He would make him "a great nation" and through him "all the families on the earth" would be blessed (Gen. 12:2-3).
  2. Carrying forth God's purposes, Abraham's descendants were formed into a nation. Their faithfulness to the covenant would result in their peculiar identity as the people of God.

*Exodus 19:5-6: "Now therefore, if you will indeed obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession among all peoples, for all the earth is mine; and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation."*

3. Christ's finished work not only provided forgiveness of sins, but it advanced God's work of creating a people for Himself by bringing into existence the church.

*Titus 2:13-14: "...waiting for our blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ, who gave himself for us to redeem us from all lawlessness and to purify for himself a people for his own possession who are zealous for good works."*

*1 Peter 2:9-10: "But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy." (cf. Ex. 19:5-6)*

- B. Our true nature as the church, and as Christians, is *corporate*. God is saving a people, not an unconnected group of isolated individuals.
- C. This is not merely theoretical. Our lives are to give expression to the reality of our existence as the people of God. To deny this by pursuing individualism or independence is to isolate ourselves from the express purpose of God. The local church is God's appointed context for this to take place.
- D. What does this mean practically? What is God's intention for our lives together? Is it simply attending the same gathering on a Sunday? Is it merely acknowledging the same body of doctrines?

Far from so many of our modern misconceptions, the biblical picture of the church (Acts 2:42-27) can best be described as *community*: a group of people, joined by a common life, united by common values and a common purpose, devoted to living out this life together within the larger society. This is the type of church life God calls us to—a life that shines as a testimony to His work in our lives.

*Acts 2:42-47: "And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. And awe came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were being done through the apostles. And all who believed were together and had all things in common. And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need. And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved."*

"Those first Christians of Acts 2 were not devoting themselves to social activities but to a relationship... They understood that they had entered this relationship by faith in Jesus Christ, not by joining an organization. And they realized that their fellowship with God logically brought them into fellowship with one another. Through their union with Christ they were formed into a spiritually organic community... We must grasp the idea that fellowship means belonging to one another in the Body of Christ, with all the privileges and responsibilities that such a relationship entails." —Jerry Bridges

## II. The Nature of Our Fellowship

Because the Holy Spirit has joined us together as a community, our relationships are to be marked by this reality. We don't simply attend the same service, or enjoy the same interests—we have been united at the deepest level by the Spirit of God. The New Testament characterizes our relationships with each other by the word *fellowship*.

"We should not think of our fellowship with other Christians as a spiritual luxury, an optional addition to the exercises of private devotions. Fellowship is one of the great words of the New Testament: it denotes something that is vital to a Christian's spiritual health, and central to the Church's true life...The church will flourish and Christians will be strong only when there is fellowship." —J. I. Packer

#### A. What is fellowship?

The word often translated *fellowship* in the New Testament (*koinonia*—cf. Acts 2:42) is also rendered *participation*, *partnership*, and *communion*. The word expresses the idea of sharing something in common, or joining a mutual endeavor (often with sacrifice involved).

1. Biblical writers took up this word to describe the relationship believers have with God through Christ.

*1 Corinthians 1:9: "God is faithful, by whom you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord."*

2. It was also extended to describe the relationship believers have with each other.

*1 John 1:3: "...that which we have seen and heard we proclaim also to you, so that you too may have fellowship with us; and indeed our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ."*

3. Our fellowship with God is what makes our fellowship with others possible. This is human relationship at the deepest level possible, that only Christians can hope to experience.

C.J. Mahaney defines fellowship as "The communication of our current relationship with and experience of God Himself." Biblical fellowship is not merely "socializing"—it is sharing our common life in Christ: life that is rich, enduring, and eternal.

#### B. The biblical example of fellowship

The Bible is filled with things we are to do "to," "with," or "for one another." Here is a sampling of how we are to position ourselves to experience true fellowship:

1. Worship God together (Eph. 5:18-20).
2. Pray for one another (Eph. 6:18).
3. Carry one another's burdens (Gal. 6:2).
4. Encourage one another (I Thes. 5:11).
5. Confess our sins to one another (Jas. 5:16).
6. Correct one another (Gal. 6:1; Mt. 18:15).
7. Serve one another (Gal. 5:13).

We must recognize our responsibilities as members of the body and position ourselves to serve others. In short, we must give ourselves to *purposeful involvement* in each others' lives.

### III. The Fruit of Our Fellowship

Fellowship that is truly biblical has both profound purposes and rich benefits in our relationships together in the church.

A. *Growth in godliness.* Sanctification is a group project. God never intended it to be accomplished in isolation from other Christians in the local church. All genuine Christians should have a desire to grow in godliness, and we simply can never progress on our own like we can in close relationships with other believers.

1. We need the consistent encouragement of others. Consistent, intentional, and specific encouragement is to be a mark of those who serve “the God of encouragement” (Rom. 15:5).

*1 Thess. 5:11: “Therefore encourage one another and build one another up, just as you are doing.”*

2. We need others to help us resist sin and to strengthen our resolve for godliness.

*Heb. 3:13: “But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called “today,” that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin.”*

3. We need the input of others to help us see our sin and repent from it. Because we will inevitably fail to recognize and take responsibility for our sin, we desperately need the correction of others. Giving and receiving correction require humility and examined motives, but these are a true expression of biblical love.

*Galatians 6:1: “Brothers, if anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness. Keep watch on yourself, lest you too be tempted.”*

4. We need to confess our sins to others so as to weaken sin’s power and invite accountability. Few things are more effective in cultivating humility, weakening sin, and promoting fellowship than confessing our sins and pursuing others’ evaluation and perspective. Thankfully, God doesn’t leave us on our own in our fight against sin!

*James 5:16: “Therefore, confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you may be healed.”*

B. *Providing mutual care.* We live in a fallen world, and the effects of sin—our own and others’—are all around us: pain, sorrow, sickness, death. God has promised to care for us, and much of His care comes to us through other believers. Indeed, Christians are to be distinguished by their sacrificial love for one another.

*1 Corinthians 12:24-26: “But God has so composed the body, giving greater honor to the part that lacked it, that there may be no division in the body, but that the members may have the same care for one another. If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together.”*

C. *Benefiting from the diversity of gifts.* The Holy Spirit distributes gifts to build the church. But God has also made us dependent upon one another—no one person has all the gifts necessary. We need one another and the unique gifts each one brings to mature as a body.

*Eph. 4:16: "...from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love."*

*1 Cor. 12:7: "To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good."*

- D. *Presenting a compelling witness.* Ultimately, our lives together are intended to present to the world a compelling witness of the grace of God. Our unity and love for one another is one of the most powerful testimonies we can give to unbelievers who are lost, isolated, fragmented, and ultimately without hope.

*John 13:35: "By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."*

## IV. A Means of Our Fellowship at Sovereign Grace Church: Care Groups

One of the primary means of building relationships and cultivating fellowship with each other at Sovereign Grace Church is through our network of small groups—what we call Care Groups. While we are joined to all believers in the local church, Care Groups allow us to relate more deeply with a smaller number of people. Care Groups are not a passing fad at Sovereign Grace Church; they have been a part of our church since its inception, and they provide an important context for accomplishing a number of essential biblical priorities.

"The value of the small group is that it can become a community of related persons and in it the benefit of relatedness cannot be missed nor its challenge evaded. I do not think it is an exaggeration to say, therefore, that small groups... are indispensable for our growth into spiritual maturity." —John Stott

### A. Purpose of Care Groups

1. **Application of God's word to our lives.** Merely hearing God's word is insufficient; we must apply it to our lives for there to be fruit. Care Groups enable us to do this together. We seek to apply the Bible's teaching, review Sunday messages, discuss Christian books, and use a variety of other resources with the intention of growing in the grace and knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ.
2. **Pursuit of biblical fellowship.** Genuine fellowship isn't practical in a large crowd. Care Groups provide a place where we can build intimate relationships, care for one another, and help each other grow in our relationship with God.
3. **Ministry to one another.** God has made us dependent on each other, and Care Groups provide a context where we can minister to each other with the gifts that God has given us. Meetings often include times of prayer for one another and opportunities for individuals to exercise spiritual gifts for the edification of others. This also provides a wonderful context to introduce guests to our life as a church.

## B. Participation in Care Groups

Since Sovereign Grace Church is really built upon Care Groups, we don't know of a better way to get involved in the life of this church than to begin participating in a group near you. If you have not already begun attending a Care Group, please check out the map in our lobby or on our website for more information about groups in your neighborhood. Because life together isn't just about agreeing to a set of doctrines, but being in relationship with one another, Care Group participation is required for all individuals pursuing membership at Sovereign Grace.

## C. Our responsibilities within Care Groups

Each member is important to the group, and should seek to contribute to the group's health and success. We each have the responsibility in our group to:

1. Faithfully attend meetings and functions. We're much more likely to benefit if we are actually present!
2. Willingly participate. Come ready to contribute, to serve, to share, and to open yourself to others. When the group has an assignment, diligently complete it. Both you and others will benefit from your participation.
3. Build relationships with other members outside the meeting. Don't confine your investment to the Care Group meeting—let this be the spring board to rich, enduring relationships.

## V. The Christian Life: A Life to be Shared

The Christian life is not a matter of privatized belief. Jesus described the existence of believers in astonishing terms: *"Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life. He does not come into judgment, but has passed from death to life."* (John 5:24). As we see in the New Testament, this life is one that is to be shared with others. Just as the Holy Spirit is a foretaste of our eternal life in heaven (2 Cor. 1:21-22), so is the life of the church—with all its imperfections—to be a foretaste of our fellowship with the saints in heaven (Heb. 12:22-24). May this amazing privilege be our ongoing experience as we "continue the journey together."

*"By his grace, together we are being changed into the image of Jesus Christ through progressive sanctification. Together we are experiencing mutual care, genuine fellowship, and the ministry of the Holy Spirit. We no longer just see—we observe. We no longer simply attend—we participate. We no longer selfishly consume—instead we are carrying out God's purpose for our lives as we contribute to the building of the local church."* —C.J. Mahaney

Also see Appendix A: Relational Commitments