

Once Apart, Now Together

THEOLOGICAL THEME: God changes us by bringing us into fellowship with Himself and with His people.

Almost twenty years ago, social scientist Robert Putnam published a book titled *Bowling Alone* about the collapse and revival of American community. Putnam's main point was that individual Americans were becoming more and more, well, individualistic. He cited plenty of sociological data and demographic studies, but the title was drawn from the anecdotal consideration of one of America's late, great communal pastimes—the bowling league. Where once men and women would congregate at their local lanes to experience camaraderie, teamwork, and the kind of social interaction integral to community happiness, more and more people were “bowling alone.”¹

In 2010, Putnam reported on a different trend, challenging some of his bolder claims about Americans' personal isolationism, but the problem of cultural loneliness persists in various forms. Communal camaraderie may be making a comeback among Millennials who gather as groups in coffee shops, but in many parts of the country, neighborhoods are still full of people in close proximity who mostly keep to themselves.

99 Essential Christian Doctrines

71. Union with Christ

At the heart of our salvation is our union with Christ. The Bible describes salvation as entering into a covenant relationship with God and also describes the church (which is made up of believers) as the bride of Christ (2 Cor. 11:2; Eph. 5:23-32). Christians believe that Christ dwells in our hearts through faith (Christ in us) and that we are simultaneously dwelling in Him (Eph. 3:17; Col. 1:27; 3:1-4). This union is indissoluble; it will last for all eternity.



How have you seen or experienced the drift toward isolationism in our culture today?

In this session, we will see how God changes us and brings us into fellowship with Himself and with others and how we are to carry out our mission to extend this fellowship to the world.

1. Once apart from God, now we have fellowship with Christ (1 Cor. 1:9).

We can trace the innate human sense of alienation all the way back to the first man and woman. When Adam and Eve disobeyed God, their rebellion had cataclysmic spiritual consequences as well as physical ramifications. But perhaps the biggest consequence of the fall of humanity was the death that resulted: both physical death, when our bodies will die, and spiritual death, a separation from God that has already taken place. This separation from God is the deepest ache in every human being.

But there is an answer, a way to end this ache and replace it once again with the vibrant relationship with God He intended from the beginning. And that answer rests in the person of Jesus Christ. Here is how Paul put it in 1 Corinthians 1:9.

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

To appreciate the beauty and fullness of what Paul was saying here, it is helpful to think of the temple complex in Jerusalem. The temple was designed with a concentric circle approach. Each step closer to the center of the temple, the holy of holies, limited who could enter.

God's message was clear—He is a holy God, so entering into His presence is beyond any hope in this world. But there is a hope from outside of the world, and this hope has come into the world in Jesus. On account of Jesus' death, God tore from top to bottom the dividing veil barring access to the holy of holies, signifying that the divorce between God and people can only be reconciled from heaven. And in His resurrection, Jesus has conquered the death that our sin deserves, making reconciliation between exiled sinners and a holy God possible.

Where Adam sinned, Christ saved. Where Adam fell, Christ rose. Where Adam divided, Christ unites. And we who were once apart from God can now enjoy fellowship with Christ and flourish in that fellowship.

Because we are in Christ, we are able to experience the loving fellowship our triune God has enjoyed for eternity. We are completely accepted by God and secure in our relationship with Him because our sin has been placed on Jesus, who paid its penalty for us, and in its place we have been credited with His righteousness. We are finally free to stand boldly, but humbly, before God (Heb. 10:19-22).



What are some ways people of the world deal with the feeling and reality of loneliness?



Why do you think people don't connect their own sense of loneliness to their lack of a relationship with God?

Our fellowship with Jesus also means that we can experience peace, comfort, and joy in our lives as we never have before. It is freeing to know God and be fully known and accepted by Him. God will always be there with us no matter what, always graciously loving us and extending His peace, comfort, and joy to us.

The world can only experience these as shadows because the substance is found only in Christ. That is not to say that we will be spared from all suffering and pain when we are in Christ. As we saw in the previous session, part of sharing in Christ's salvation is sharing in His sufferings. However, what this does mean is that we will be able to endure our suffering with patience, knowing that there is purpose in it. We are comforted knowing that suffering is temporary and that God is working to bring Himself glory through it.



In a world full of broken relationships, how does it make you feel to know that in Christ, God both knows you completely and at the same time accepts you eternally?

2. Once apart from the church, now we have fellowship (Rom. 12:9-18).

⁹ Let love be genuine. Abhor what is evil; hold fast to what is good. ¹⁰ Love one another with brotherly affection. Outdo one another in showing honor. ¹¹ Do not be slothful in zeal, be fervent in spirit, serve the Lord. ¹² Rejoice in hope, be patient in tribulation, be constant in prayer. ¹³ Contribute to the needs of the saints and seek to show hospitality.

¹⁴ Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. ¹⁵ Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. ¹⁶ Live in harmony with one another. Do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly. Never be wise in your own sight. ¹⁷ Repay no one evil for evil, but give thought to do what is honorable in the sight of all. ¹⁸ If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.

This passage shows us a picture of *koinonia* in action. *Koinonia* is the Greek word for “fellowship,” and it is used throughout the New Testament. As God’s people, we share fellowship with God through Jesus Christ because of His death and resurrection, and as Christ’s people, we also share fellowship with each other, loving one another as God has loved us.

In Romans 12:9-18 we see sinners who have been reconciled vertically to God through Christ reflecting that reconciliation horizontally with one another. The two are fused together. If we are in Christ and loved by Him, we will love others and seek to live in unity together—a unity that is based on our shared identity in Christ and our love for Him.

 Looking again at Romans 12:9-18, which instruction stands out to you, and why?

 Why is it so important for the church to have these horizontal relationships in order?

As you look over the imperatives Paul listed in Romans 12, it doesn't take long to notice the depth of relationship God desires of us. Romans 12:10 especially shows us the beautiful stalemate of grace-driven relationships—each party should seek to out-honor the other! Imagine if our churches were known for *this* kind of “deadlock,” where we were all busy not looking out for our own preferences and needs but for the building up of others, going out of our way to make sure others felt welcomed, encouraged, and comforted. Now that would lead to beautiful gospel community, but it would also make a mark on our culture around us. Living selflessly is countercultural. It is different, but different in a good way.

Voices from Church History

“Into the community you were called, the call was not meant for you alone; in the community of the called you bear your cross, you struggle, you pray. You are not alone, even in death, and on the Last Day you will be only one member of the great congregation of Jesus Christ. If you scorn the fellowship of the brethren, you reject the call of Jesus Christ, and thus your solitude can only be hurtful to you.”²

—Dietrich Bonhoeffer
(1906-1945)

This is something the gospel does. It is something *only the gospel* can do. The gospel does not make us into little judges of each other, always evaluating others to see if they are living and serving the way they should. Nor does it make us people who keep sizing each other up, measuring each other, and rehearsing each other's failings. The gospel is not tuned to the frequency of accusation.

Instead, the gospel is God's love made manifest, and the church is the gospel of God's love made visible. God's love cannot puff us up; it cannot make us prideful; it cannot make us selfish; it cannot make us arrogant; it cannot make us rude; it cannot make us gossipy; it cannot make us accusers—because God's love was poured out on us first as sinners. So the more we press into the gospel, the more the gospel takes over our hearts, the less we will see these sinful things and the more we will see what is expected in Romans 12:9-18.



What might “outdoing one another in showing honor” look like in the community life of your group and church?

3. Once without purpose, now we have fellowship in the mission (Phil. 1:3-7).

The church exists for a purpose, and that purpose gives our lives meaning. Imagine God reconciled us to Himself and to each other and our only response was to gather together to talk about the gospel amongst ourselves. What a short-changed experience of the gospel it would be if we failed to share what we have experienced with others! The movement of God to individuals and into the church culminates in an outward vision for the lost and unbelieving world. In Philippians 1:3-7, Paul wrote:

³ I thank my God in all my remembrance of you, ⁴ always in every prayer of mine for you all making my prayer with joy, ⁵ because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now. ⁶ And I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ. ⁷ It is right for me to feel this way about you all, because I hold you in my heart, for you are all partakers with me of grace, both in my imprisonment and in the defense and confirmation of the gospel.

The community that is made by the gospel is seen here by Paul as a partnership. The reconciling work of the gospel won't be complete until the day Jesus returns, but until then, this partnership works together to defend and confirm the gospel among those in the world. The gospel is not meant to be hoarded but generously proclaimed!

While the gospel may save us as individuals, it does not save us to an individualistic faith. What has reconciled us must now make us ministers of reconciliation (2 Cor. 5:18). This means that we are not following through on our own gospel union with Christ if we aren't joining the church on mission to share this gospel with an unbelieving world around us. Being part of the church is not above and beyond God's calling for a Christian. It is not the icing on the cake. Partnering requires that we unite around the gospel, set aside or work through any and all other differences, and sacrificially pursue our shared mission together. That is not extra; it is at the core of the gospel's implications.



Why might we struggle to commit ourselves to the mission of the church?

If we are pursuing mission together, we will need to set aside our preferences and keep focused on our real priorities. We will need to seek the flourishing of others instead of seeking our own fulfillment. We will strive to value church membership not for any privileges we may get but for the responsibilities and obligations that we can help fulfill. It's about what we can give toward the mission of the church, not take from it.

That is a challenging way to see the church and ourselves, but don't miss who will make this happen. It is God who began a good work in us in providing us with salvation who will carry it out to completion. God is at work in us and through us. We are to work in our role of advancing the gospel, but we are to work in God's empowerment.



Voices from the Church

"The completion of the Great Commission will include great suffering, but eternity will prove it is worth the price."³

—David Platt

Let's not be stingy with the grace God so generously has given and continues to give to us.



What are the dangers of failing to recognize that God is the One at work in and through us?



What are the dangers of ignoring our role in the work of proclaiming the gospel to the world?

Conclusion

Because of Christ, we are brought into relationship with God and we are brought into community with one another. These vertical and horizontal relationships are not tangent to the gospel; they are not side benefits of it—they are at its core. The gospel centers on relationship, and that is why we have both the freedom and the calling to invest in these relationships as fully as possible. Everything we do should be impacted by these relationships made possible in Christ. Love brought us into relationship, and that same love sends us out to bring others into the same fellowship.



Voices from Church History

“The church which is not a missionary church will be a missing church when Jesus comes.”⁴

—F. B. Meyer (1847-1929)

CHRIST CONNECTION: *Koinonia* is the Greek word for fellowship, and it is used throughout the New Testament. As God’s people, we share fellowship with God through Jesus Christ because of His death and resurrection. As Christ’s people, we share fellowship with each other, loving one another as God has loved us.

HIS MISSION, YOUR MISSION

MISSIONAL APPLICATION: God calls us to join with other believers as we share fellowship in our mission to extend the gospel to the ends of the earth.

1. How can we help unbelievers recognize their need for fellowship with God through Jesus Christ?

2. With whom do you need to rejoice or weep (Rom. 12:15), and how will you express your fellowship with these people?

3. What will the idea of being a partner on gospel mission with your group/church mean for your daily routines?

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The Gospel Project*

Adult Personal Study Guide ESV
Volume 6, Number 3 Spring 2018

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Printed in the United States of America

The Gospel Project®: *Adult Personal Study Guide* ESV
(ISSN 2330-9393; Item 005573553) is published
quarterly by LifeWay Christian Resources,
One LifeWay Plaza, Nashville, TN 37234,
Thom S. Rainer, President. © 2017 LifeWay
Christian Resources.

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shipments mailed quarterly to one address, email
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