



Editor's Note

Some time ago, I noticed a sign in an airport that was under reconstruction: "Excuse Our Dust!" Our little publication *ESN* is also undergoing some reconstruction as changes in layout, publishing, and mailing are overdue. Hopefully, the process won't generate much dust, and if all goes well, you may not notice any change at

all—except a couple issues being sent out a bit late. We apologize for this and want to assure our readers that, as a ministry for the Lord, we do everything possible to be accurate, timely, and gracious in our work. Pray for us as we move forward, that our commitment to excellence would not waver. Thank you.



Problem Solving

Thoughts on Local Church "Alive-ness" (part 4)

by Jack Spender

In our previous study of alive-ness in the local church, we considered the apostles' doctrine or Bible teaching, the first item in Acts 2:42. In this article, we want to move on to the second item, "fellowship."

Before we can evaluate our particular local assembly, we must be certain that we understand two things: What does the word "fellowship" really mean, and why is it so important in the life of the church, especially as it relates to alive-ness? We may discover that we know less than we thought about this subject. But once we understand these things, we can evaluate the content, structure, and climate of our particular church. And then later, I'd like to offer some practical suggestions for those who sense the need to improve.

What is Fellowship?

The Greek word for fellowship is *koinonia*, high on the list of misunderstood New Testament words. Many think of it as a coffee break between the meetings of the church! Two passages will shed some light.

According to 1 John 1, fellowship is something that believers have, and according to 2 Cor. 8 and 9, it is something that they do. Reading through 1 John 1, we note that true fellowship is based upon a relationship with God (vs. 3) which enables a relationship with fellow believers (vs. 7), and these relationships affect "fullness of joy" in the Christian life (vs. 4). The word "relationship" is important. It is not something that we earn but is part of our birthright in Christ.

Reading through 2 Cor. 8–9, we note that the word *koinonia* is used several times. In 8:4, Paul refers to "the fellowship of the ministry," or a relationship that finds expression in serving. In 8:23, Paul refers to Titus as his "partner [*koinonos*] and fellow-worker," and in 9:13, referring to the Corinthians' generosity toward the

poor saints, he speaks of their "liberal distribution," again using the word *koinonia*.

Putting these two ideas together, we might describe *koinonia* as relationships that are productive and, remembering what John said about fullness of joy, we can think in terms of "satisfying, productive relationships." Not the best definition of "fellowship" perhaps, but one that will work for our purposes because it emphasizes three important truths about the word: relationships are important; they are not static but working; and they bring joy when these things are in order.

Why is it Important?

Based on the above, it will quickly be seen that a spirit of alive-ness in the church will more easily come from joyful, active relationships than from stern, passive ones! Our fellowship is not just with God but with others in the body of Christ. Thus, Paul prays in Eph. 3:18 that believers may be able to comprehend the love of Christ "with all saints."

Think again of the items mentioned in Acts 2:42 and where fellowship falls in the list. Fellowship is critical in the life of the church because it is created by the Word of God. It leads to thanksgiving (as seen, for example, in the breaking of bread or communion [*koinonia*], 1 Cor. 10:16), and to concern for others (as expressed in prayers). But there is another reason why fellowship is so important to alive-ness, and please give this matter your careful attention.

In many local churches, going to "the meetings" means that people will leave their personal "satisfying, productive relationships" of family, leisure enjoyments, and work behind! They will attend church, go through the motions, keep the meetings going, and then quickly return to their

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When our children were younger, my wife was careful to make meals that provided them with a balanced diet. Like most parents, we struggled to get them to eat their vegetables but, understanding the bigger picture, we knew that it was important for their health. In like manner, preaching and teaching from the Old Testament provides believers with important components for their spiritual diet. Most believers recognize the weight of the OT, if only by comparing its size and space with the NT, although that is rapidly changing with the growth of the technological text. Fewer spend quality time thinking about its value and even fewer wrestle with how to apply it in today's fast-paced technological age. Reading the OT is crucial, but understanding why we should be using the OT is even more important.

Appreciate it: spend time valuing God's Word.

A surface appreciation for the OT can be easily cultivated. The stories of people such as Joseph, Jonah, or Job provide interesting snapshots from a past time. Yet one might abstract a few key verses from Job, recount the story of the prophet who ran from God, or even make wonderful comparisons between the struggles of Joseph and the Lord Jesus without actually developing a sense of each individual's life or the impact of the accounts. For sure, believers should spend more time in John than Jonah, but that does not mean that Jonah is less inspired than John. So an initial reason for quality time with the OT is the firm conviction that it is the inspired Word of God.

Another reason for reading the OT is the fact that it was the Bible of the apostles and the first believers. But especially significant is the fact that it was the Bible of the Lord Jesus Christ. When Christ spoke from the Scriptures, He was using the OT. He quoted from the OT when tempted by the devil (Luke 4:4), reminded the learned leaders that it could open their eyes (16:31), and drew attention to its fulfillment in Himself (24:44).

Just observing the growth of the early church in Acts, one cannot help but be impressed with how well the Jews knew the Scriptures and how quickly the Gentiles embraced them. Paul's letters, primarily to Gentiles, contain arguments based upon the OT as well as encouragements for its continued use (2 Tim. 3:14-15).

Gaining the big picture can be added to the list of reasons for expanding our appreciation of the OT. An overview of topics such as God's holiness, Israel's election, or the coming of the Messiah will provide a helpful foundation for the development of individual passages relating to each topic. In many ways, spending time in the OT Scriptures will enhance our understanding of the NT and increase our appreciation for the intricacies of God's eternal plan.

Understand it: spend time developing the context of God's Word

In order to effectively use the OT in the life of the assembly, one needs to understand its message, both as a whole and in its constituent parts. Reading the OT is greatly enhanced by observation and meditation. A slow prayerful reading of smaller units of the OT can open the door to many valuable insights from the Spirit about who God is, what He does, and how He thinks!

Uncovering background data from the culture of ancient Israel, including areas such as geography, customs, or terminology, is an important part of this process. Consideration should be given to the type of literature being studied (narrative, poetry, law, etc.), as well as the author's purpose. Smaller units come into focus when considering the whole, much like individual pieces of a puzzle, and take on more meaning when seen in completion. Investing time to fill in proper background data provides fruitful ground for the Holy Spirit to bring key teachings out of a passage. Often, verses are quickly cited because they seem to support a particular view, when in reality they might be taken out of

context. A good example of this would be the invocation of Laban's seemingly friendly statement in Genesis 31:49, "May the Lord watch between you and me when we are absent one from the other," which, in context, is anything but friendly. In reality, the opposing parties are drawing a line in the sand to make a treaty while invoking God's presence to referee the situation.

We should remember that the OT is God's revelation to people about Himself. He is disclosing who He is and how He works. We are not only prepared for the NT, but we can better understand the NT and the life of the Lord Jesus Christ by spending time in the OT. Without the years of teaching on the unity of the One God, NT believers may well have succumbed to a tri-theistic view of God rather than the biblical view of the Trinity. We embrace the triune nature of God because we know that He is One from a firm grounding of that truth in the OT. Just as a healthy diet comes from choosing specific items from different food groups in light of the bigger picture, so too, digging deeper into specific sections of the Old Testament will enhance a believer's spiritual growth.

Apply it: spend time edifying believers with God's Word.

Lasting application of the biblical text should link the material to the present in a culturally relevant way that seeks to affect the life of the believer. Our culture is generally motivated by directives, so we are less prepared to fully develop OT passages for a contemporary application. The use of fulfilled OT prophecy and even future prophetic statements are usually frankly observed and often with much attached speculation. The historical books become stories that are simply retold for quick illustrations, while less exposure is given to OT law and poetry on any regular basis. In short, there is a tendency to develop what is obvious rather than spending time to understand the material in a way that brings out its relevance for believers today. However, once an OT passage is rightly understood in its context,

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own personal “satisfying, productive relationships.” If asked why the church is small or shrinking, they will probably say that more gospel work is needed to bring people in to swell their numbers. But they are forgetting something very important.

The world is filled with people who lack “satisfying, productive relationships.” Their relationships are broken—e.g., marriages or families. And because of this, productivity is low or non-existent. And because their lives are painful and unsatisfying, they turn to all kinds of things to dull the pain. Yes, they need the gospel of God’s love and forgiveness, but—and here is the real point—they need to encounter it in the context of alive-ness, where they are exposed to satisfying, productive relationships. Coming “to church” holds no attraction for them. They do not want to sacrifice to keep your meetings going!

Now think of a local church that is known for alive-ness. Yes, the people have homes and families (relationships) and (productive) jobs or pastimes, too, but the primary sphere of their satisfying, productive relationships is the fellowship of the church! It’s easy to spot the difference. I visited one assembly and was warned upon arrival, “You won’t want to be standing in the parking lot at noon.” Sure enough, after the message, there was a rush to the door, the roar of engines and, in a few minutes, the lot was empty. “We have to get to the restau-

rants before the big churches empty out,” my host explained.

Contrast that with a church where “closing up” is a true sacrifice for someone, because the people don’t want to leave. They are so involved in one another’s lives (relationships), and there is so much of the Lord’s work to discuss (productive), that they love to stay together (satisfying)—sometimes for hours after “the meetings.”

Evaluating Fellowship

Once we have a realistic understanding of what biblical *koinonia* is and why it’s important, we can attempt an honest evaluation of our own particular assembly. Let us do this humbly and wisely, remembering that the Lord alone is the Judge. He moves among the lampstands and inspects the light. We seek only to be “helpers of your joy” (2 Cor. 1:24). As in the past, we’ll look at the content, structure, and climate of fellowship.

Content: Whether times of fellowship are “formal,” as in an assembly gathering to study, express, or improve relationships of saints or families, or “informal,” such as an outing, a work day, a sports activity or festive meal, it’s important not to lose sight of the goal. Such times are not fellowship primarily for a negative reason (they don’t fit in any other category of Acts 2:42), but for a positive reason; the activity will foster satisfying productive relationships in lives!

This can be exciting if our mo-

tives are pure. It’s a time to learn more about the people we meet with. What are their gifts? Where do they live and work? What do they love about the assembly and what do they wish could change? Do they have questions or insights that could help us? Who are their families, and what can we learn about them? Who are they reaching out to in their own world, and do they face burdens that we could help carry? The questions are endless, but they will be satisfying if the people sense that we are interested in them as people, not as potential “members” for the church. It is true that people enjoy what they call “fellowship,” whether they understand it or not. But elders should be wise in using these times for spiritual purposes.

Nevertheless, one of the most wonderful benefits of true, biblical fellowship is its value in reaching lost people. A statement that I read in a little book many years ago has proven true over a lifetime in the Lord’s work: “We will win the world for Christ when we learn that fellowship is the key to evangelism.” There isn’t time to explore this here, but go back and read John 4 in the light of it. What we learn can have a major impact on the kinds of fellowship times that we design for the saints!

In the next issue, we’ll look at the **structure** and **climate** of groups where fellowship can flourish.



How Healthy is Your Old Testament Understanding?

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there are many truths that are applicable for our time. An important key is to prayerfully discern what the Lord is doing, why He is doing it, and how that reflects on Who He is. After all, the Bible is ultimately about the Lord and the person of His Son rather than the people that He used along the way or the authors whom He employed to write it. Perhaps the greatest problem with application comes from taking material out of context.

We are not supposed to be leaders like David (who was king of Israel) or Moses (who spoke Egyptian); rather, we are to learn from these leaders

by examining their relationship with God. We see the Lord’s expectations for them (in that time) and their faith (or lack of faith, since both David and Moses were murderers) by examining their relationship with the Lord. We learn what He enjoys and what He rejects. God rejected Saul for sparing Ammonite sheep, but the greater problem was his disobedience evidenced by the Ammonite trophies of war. Rather than moralize the moment, we can learn volumes from understanding the context of one of the most profound statements that Samuel ever uttered

regarding the law, faith, and obedience (1 Samuel 15:22).

The believer today is in a living relationship with the God of the Old Testament through our Lord Jesus Christ, so time invested in reading, interpreting, and applying the Old Testament to one’s life is what the Lord intended. By including the Old Testament in our spiritual diet, we will affirm Paul’s reminder to the Romans that “whatever was written in earlier times was written for our instruction, so that through perseverance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope” (15:4).



Mmmmm...can you smell it? The roast in the oven is almost done—and those twice-baked potatoes! The cheese is bubbling and they are browning nicely. Don't let the zucchini burn out on the grill! It takes some coordination to get all these luscious components out to the guests while everything is still hot and at its peak flavor.

How does the table look? Knives and spoons on the right, forks over the napkin on the left. The menu is set and so is the table. How do you feel? It's no surprise that we ladies enjoy making dinners for the saints. We may spend hours deliberating over a menu and other details, then cleaning, shopping, and preparing. After all, guests enjoy being fussed over, and all the thought and work that we put into the meal makes people feel special, right? Of course!

This subject brings me to a very special meal for an honored guest in Luke 10. We all know the story of Mary and Martha and the contrast between them. Our Lord reminds Martha that it is not prudent to be worried about many things, least of all getting the food out and dragging Mary away from her place at Jesus' feet. We could assume that Martha heeded the Lord,

as we see her again serving at a feast in John 12. She just serves; no fussing, fuming, complaining, or accusing—just serving. She learned a lesson that we also may do well to heed.

Martha learned more than one lesson from Luke 10, to be sure, but one that stands out to me (and I have earned the nickname "Martha" on more than one occasion) is that there is one thing that a guest wants more than anything else: our time and undivided attention.


Does this mean that people don't want or appreciate a good meal? Of course not! Does it matter if my house is a disaster? It may—or may not. I have been a guest at messy houses where I had a great time and a simple meal and, conversely, to estates with rich delicacies but cold atmospheres. Which would you prefer?

Jesus said that a cup of cold water given in His name is worthy of reward. Why? First, because it is given in Jesus' name, and second, because it meets a need. Unless we are hosting homeless people (and there is a time to do that), most guests have kitchens and food that they can prepare for themselves. We host saints in the local assembly, not primarily to feed them,

but to meet their needs. Food is an excuse to show them Christ's love.

I have been blessed to be a guest at one older couple's apartment on a few occasions. On a limited budget, they served adequate food, not lavish. I had more fun singing hymns and playing games after dinner; the care that they took to meet my need for relaxation trumped any temptation that my appetite had to stuff itself.

I used to host teens every week to a simple spaghetti dinner. Sometimes I threw in meatballs, sometimes I didn't. These kids enjoyed "passing the rolls" every week by tossing them around the table. I was not there to teach etiquette, I was there to be a trusted confidant. It's amazing how allowing some silliness (which I really don't like) can earn a hearing with young people.

Hospitality will mean one thing to one guest and another to someone else. I suppose that the bottom line is to know whom you are serving, pray for discernment, work less, have more fun, and try to meet needs. If you can do all that and still serve a stellar 5-star meal, kudos! Just don't let lack of perfection hinder you from serving. Even giving a thirsty person a cup of cold water is hospitality to Jesus. 

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Note: All words referring to God have the initial letter capitalized. The original languages of the Bible do not use capitalization; this is the convention in some translations but not in others, so at times there may be inconsistencies in usage in *ESN* articles.

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