

Normal NT Fellowship

Acts 5:12-13 & 2:41-47

Pastor Jeremy Cagle, September 10, 2017

I always breathe a sigh of relief when I'm walking up to a pulpit because I always remember the comment by John Calvin, that it would be better for the preacher to fall and break his neck while walking into the pulpit than not be the first to follow God. And my conscience reminds me of my shortcomings. It's a pleasure to be with God's people wherever we are found. I've been in Uganda, I've been in Israel, had the opportunity to speak in both of those countries. It's a pleasure. There is a common thread, a common fellowship that surfaces and you can sense throughout. It is particularly a joy for me to be here this morning. 65 years ago, next December, my mom and dad were pastoring a small Church in Calgary at the time. They were up here from the US just long enough to pop me out. I was born December 1952, have rarely had the opportunity to be back to Canada after we moved back to the States before I was two. So, the privilege of being here in Canada, the land of my birth and being able to proclaim the Gospel of Jesus Christ, is something that I don't quite fully understand and yet for me it exists. So I want to thank you for having extended the opportunity to come here, I want to thank you for the love that you have shown to Jeremy, my friend, your new pastor. ...

Today is your Membership Sunday and we want to thank you for the opportunity to participate in that, a special time for your church. And it bears thinking about the fact that all too often within today's church in the 20th and 21st century people tend to say, "I don't need to be a member of the church. Where's the Biblical basis for any kind of a concept of church membership?" And in fact, the text that I had Jeremy read this morning, Acts chapter 5 says, following the demonstration of God's sovereignty in the discipline of Ananias and Sapphira, it says, "None of the rest dared join them." It uses precisely that word, "None of the rest dared join them." So yes, there was a Biblical concept of church membership that existed even then.

What's the term that's used for that? The term is the word, *kaleo*. And if you look at an exegesis of that term, it actually means the idea of being glued together, stuck together. The same word is used in the terms of marriage; you leave and you cleave. The term that would be used for cleave is that same word that is used for being joined with the church. It is a relationship of intimacy. It is not so much what we would tend to think of in our time as a legal status. I'm part of an organization, I have certain rights and privileges, I'm able to do certain things, I'm able to not because I'm a part of that. That's not really New Testament membership. New Testament membership is a relationship of intimacy with a group of believers to whom you are allowing yourselves to be bound together in love.

Now, what does that New Testament fellowship look like? It bears focusing on that. The text that I had Jeremy turn to, Acts chapter 2, gives a description. The first time I worked through that, I ended up with something like ten points. And as I was flying up here on Friday, I'm thinking that there's no way that all ten of those points are going to stick in the minds and hearts of the people with whom I'm speaking. So it occurred to me that I could break it down into four basic points. Some of them will have sub-points, but this may help if you understand that we are looking at a group that has (characteristic of it) an uncommon passion, an uncommon pleasure, an uncommon

love. If you are really into alliteration, you can say okay, it's an uncommon pursuit. Finally, it's an uncommon presence; an uncommon passion, an uncommon pleasure, an uncommon pursuit, and an uncommon presence.

Now how is it that it's uncommon? It's uncommon in the eyes of the watching world. It's uncommon in the eyes of those who do not know Christ, who have not had their minds opened by the Spirit in His preeminent work of grace, who have not been regenerated, yet. The operative word is "yet" there. It is an uncommon experience for the unbeliever to come in and sense what is going on within your fellowship here. It should be uncommon and yet it should be the norm. What we read here in Acts in a very real sense is the norm. It is the benchmark that we will continually strive for.

Now the first thing before we move into them, we have to remember that all of this begins with the work of the Spirit of God. Acts 2:41, "So those who received his word were baptized, and there were added that day, about 3,000 souls." We live in a numbers-dominated society. So we could be somewhat intimidated by the fact that 3,000 people joined the church on that particular day and we're only having 66 today. Get away from it. One of the great Scottish divines, great Scottish theologians, a man by the name of James Buchanan writes, "It is of great practical importance to observe that the work of the Spirit on the soul of every individual convert is substantially the same with that which takes place but only on a more extended scale in a general revival of religion." What happened in the conversation of each and every one of you who truly knows Jesus Christ is substantially, in essence, the same thing that's happened at Pentecost when Peter preached his great sermon, and on one day 3,000 joined the church. You would not be here, you would not name the name of Christ without the prior work of the Spirit prompting you to turn to Him at the preaching of His Word and repent and believe the Gospel. It won't happen. But once it has happened, we move on.

And there are five things that I want to tell you about that continuing, that uncommon passion. First of all the text says, "And they devoted themselves, they continued." A very interesting word is used there and it's in the present tense. This is an ongoing reality in their lives. There was a continuing, ongoing, unending passion. Dr MacArthur in his commentary on this particular passage points out that one sign that an individual is not truly a believer is that they stop demonstrating this continuing passion and you never see them again. 1 John says, "They went out from us, they were not from us. If they had been of us in the first place they would have not gone out from among us." So, yes, first thing to note that continuing passion is an ongoing reality in the lives of all true believers.

There is a passion for four specific definite things that are pointed out in the passage. They devoted themselves to first, the apostles' teaching. Secondly, the fellowship. Third, to the breaking of bread, And fourth to the prayers. What are these? First thing to note, expositing the passage the definite article is used. Which tells us that there was something specific, something unique about these four aspects of their lives. There is something unique about Christian fellowship, there is something unique about the prayers that we offer within the body of Christ. There is something unique, something very unique about the teaching that they devote themselves to. And finally, there is something unique about the breaking of bread that occurs within this group of people.

The apostles' teaching, what is it that the apostles' teaching consists of? If you look carefully in the book of Acts (keep in mind this describes a series of events that occurred prior to the completion of the canon, prior to completion of the Scriptures), their teaching consists of two things at this particular time. It consists of citing and developing passages from what we would know today as the Old Testament, and then citing, explaining, commenting upon what had taken place in the life, death, and resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ. When Christ met the disciples on the way to Emmaus, it says He talked with them. Later on, reflecting on what happened, it said, "He opened their minds to understand the truths of the Scriptures." That is precisely what is happening here at this particular time. The truth of the Scripture is being explained to these believers. Now we would have to understand that it would include and be limited to the New Testament and the Old Testament. There is a sense of exclusivity here.

We do not look for or listen to new revelation from the Word of God. I would never say, "Totally discount subjective sense of God's leading." But it always has to be tested by and conformed to the reality of the written Word of God. So it is a limitation. The Didache, the teaching here, the apostles' teaching, is the focus of what we communicate. There is a love for the teaching and the development of the Scriptures. One of my favourite figures in church history, and I would be less than complete if I did not tell you there were a certain number of red flags about him, Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Bonhoeffer is teaching in an underground seminary in Germany in 1935. He writes,

This is not a matter of formal religiosity, but it is a response to the presence and power of the Holy Spirit through His word. The content of what is to be said is fixed. It needs only to be handed on. The Holy Spirit speaks in this teaching, He is the fact of this teaching. And because the church is the church of the Holy Spirit, it builds itself up daily through that particular teaching. The teaching is the Scripture. We never should stop being devoted to the teaching of the word of God. It's our nourishment, it's our help in time of trouble, it's what keeps us going.

"To the fellowship," the word there (you've probably heard the term a number of times) the fellowship, the *koinonia*, the partnership of the saints. That's what he is talking about here. It is based on the apostles' teaching both in content and in organizational principles. It is also based on the apostles' teaching the Scripture in its energy.

One of the smallest books in the entire New Testament is the Book of Philemon. Philemon tells the story of a runaway slave. He had the privilege of being in the home of Philemon. Philemon hosted the church most likely in Colossae. His son, Archippus, very likely was the pastor of that particular church. Onesimus, a young man, decides to run away so that he would have enough provisions. He unlikely... He undoubtedly most likely stole something from his master. He stole some kind of goods or property, we don't know for sure, in order to sustain himself. He went from Colossae most likely to Rome. Somehow or another along the way, he made contact with Paul. And through the course of his teaching, through the course of his teaching, Paul led Onesimus to place his faith in Christ. Onesimus at that particular point in time is a new creation, he is a new being, a new believer in Christ. Paul is faced with a choice. Most likely he delayed it as long as he could because he said Onesimus was a blessing to him, he was encouraging him. Finally, Paul gets to the point where he realizes he has no option but to send Onesimus back to Philemon. And he says to him in verse 6, "I want your fellowship to be effective through the full

knowledge of what is in you for Jesus Christ." That's in some of your versions. In some of your versions the word will be, "For the knowledge of everything that is in you through Jesus Christ." The point being true Biblical fellowship will be based on your knowledge of what is in you because of the work of the Lord Jesus Christ. It will be based on your knowledge of the apostles' teaching, the truths that are taught there. The same word can be used in both contexts. It will also lead you to develop. That fellowship will produce in you a greater understanding of what has been done for you by the Lord Jesus Christ. We see that here, church history tells us that Philemon forgave Onesimus as Paul had encouraged him and had endorsed him, exhorted him to do. Most likely a young man at the time Onesimus was forgiven and soon became very involved in the service and leadership of the church serving for somewhere between 35 and 50 years. Tradition tells us that Timothy served as the Bishop of Ephesus until persecution broke out in the mid-80s and 90s and was murdered in AD 97. I believe it is Ignatius of Antioch a church historian (also a leader of the church in his own right) tells us that Onesimus was reportedly named as Timothy's successor and he served faithfully as a bishop for approximately 11 to 12 years himself before he was eventually murdered. That fellowship was productive. It led to the taking of the life of a worthless slave and making him useful. It took that life that was worthy of execution when he was still a young man and it made him a leader within the church. It made him a faithful pastor. There's a sense in which they lived out the reality of the forgiveness that we have in Christ in their own life. We want our fellowship to be dynamic, to be effective. It will be based on your knowledge of the Word of God. And where it really exists, it will produce in you a greater knowledge of the Word of God. It will be an ongoing developing cycle.

They were daily committed, they were devoted to continuing in the breaking of bread. What are we talking about here? Two things, first of all we're talking about the Lord's Supper. The Apostles made sure the people knew that on the night in which He was betrayed, the Lord took bread, He passed it around the group. He said "This is My body, broken for you." They also took the cup, "This is My blood shed for you, do this also in remembrance of Me." There is a sense in which when we do that we continually remind ourselves of what the Lord has done. There is also a sense in which that fellowship characterized most notably, most specially at the time of the Lord's Supper looks forward to the day when we're going to enter and participate in the marriage supper of the Lamb. The goal that I have at that time is to hear the Lord say, "Come on in. Well done good and faithful servant enter into the joy of the Lord. Sit down it's time to eat." As it is sign of that on an informal basis, so there's the formal but there's also the informal.

One of the things that's most remarkable about believers is how much we love to eat together. Can I get an "amen" on that? And if you look at some of us you see the issues, the challenges some of us have with weight, that bears witness to that effect. But that is part and parcel of what the disciples, the Apostles, the believers at this particular time in unison were devoted to. They were devoted to the formal observance of the Lord's Supper, they were also devoted to daily taking their meals together. The Scripture tells us later on we see that again. So there is an ongoing participation in food, enjoying that. I've heard it said (only partly in jest) "Well, there's food here, so we've got to have food here so it will be Christian." We can take that too far, but there is a sense in which there is a certain element of truth there.

The fourth thing that they were continuing to be devoted to it says "the prayers." Now we need to understand that yes, this includes oral audible communication to God. We had three men

leading in prayer before I came up and started to speak here this morning, there's something more to that however. In Colossians 3:16 it says we need to be if we're filled by the Spirit characteristically; regularly singing the Psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs. The point being that Biblically, many of the prayers that we are called to participate in have been put into music and we also sing them. So when you gather for prayer, when you gather for singing this morning we were singing "Blessed Be the Name of the Lord" taken from Job. "The Lord giveth, the Lord taketh away. Blessed be the name of the Lord." We sang the song of "All I Have is Christ." I have always thought that could have been written by Augustine, St. Augustine himself. It's so close to his life. We are singing the prayers. That's what we're doing, so don't just think when it says they were dedicated to prayers, that they were on their knees all the time just talking. They were standing up, and they were singing, and they were enjoying every bit of it. So there is an uncommon passion. This was at the heart and soul of this group of believers. And I've already seen it this morning at the heart and soul of this group of believers. So there is an uncommon passion. There is an uncommon pleasure. I love the Westminster Catechism, question number one: "What is the chief end of man? To glorify God and enjoy Him forever." And we see that in this group of believers. It said it was demonstrated in regular frequent worship.

If you go back to the beginning of the text, "And day by day, attending the temple together ... attending the temple together. They went to church because it was fun, because it was enjoyable. Why is that the case? It's a pleasure because we go to the church to see what God wants to teach us, to see what God has been doing in the lives of the believers that we are bound to within the church. We go the church to experience that fellowship, that *koinonia* that led to the change in the life of Onesimus that we were talking about earlier. So the pleasure, an uncommon pleasure in. Your friends who are not believers very likely are not gonna understand this, but that's okay. Let them come and see. But you find a certain pleasure in coming to regular worship. And again, look back at the issue of food. They enjoyed being together. It says that they shared their meals together. That's great. They enjoyed and found great pleasure in just sitting down and having a hamburger or having a coke or whatever it would be with another believer.

Why? Because in the course of that time the conversation would and should turn to, "What has God done in your life. Tell me about your story. How did you come to know Christ in saving faith?" The tendency, the temptation with, would be to see who can top each other with the degradation that we came out of. We don't want to dwell on that, but we want to talk about what God has done in the lives of each of us to bring us to this particular point. So when you gather together, and you are enjoying fellowship over food, what you're really going to be experiencing over time is the reality of the work of God in your lives. It's manifest in praising God. The text says that they praised God with simple hearts, glad and generous minds. There was a focus in their concentration. There was a winnowing away in their mind and their attention of the stuff that really doesn't count all that much. They were concentrating on what God had done. What God is calling them to. What God is teaching them from his Word, and what God is going to do in their lives in the future.

So yes. There is an uncommon passion. There is an uncommon pleasure. There is an uncommon love. If you insist, you can call it an uncommon pursuit, the pursuit being what is best for each other. There is a problem with this text that can trouble us. And that is, it says, "And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all as any had need."

They were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all as any had need. Later on we read in Acts 4:34 through 35, as a result of this, there was not a needy person among any of them. The tendency for us... And I lived the early part of my life up until about the end of 20th century, as did all of us, in the shadow of the Cold War. We were fighting international communism. And as a result of that fight, we tended to get uncomfortable. This passage, they were sharing all of their property in common. That's not what this is talking about, and if we get side tracked by that ideological conflict, we can lose sight of what is really meant here. Nobody was forcing them to take this action. However, repeatedly on the text, the grammatical tense indicates this was going on again and again and again. If a believer knew of need within the fellowship, he knew that another group of believers were struggling financially, if he had an extra piece of property that he was not using or maybe even that he was using, rather than to allow the need to not be met, he would sell that property and bring the proceeds to the apostles to be distributed to meet the needs of the believers. Put another way, they had an ongoing love that put the needs of others far ahead from the material success and prosperity that they were enjoying. There was an uncommon love. That love, we struggle with that today, and yet it should be the norm. 1 John 4:7-8 (and I will resist the urge to start singing), "Beloved, let us love one another for love is of God and he that loveth knoweth God and is born of God. He that loveth not, knoweth not God for God is love. Beloved, let us love one another." 1 John 4:7-8. Jesus tells us in John chapter 13, "By this, all people will know that you are My disciples if you love one another."

One of the early church fathers, Tertullian, a great lawyer from Northern Africa, we're told that he understood Pagans to think about Christians when they came into our fellowship. He says, "Look. Behold how much they love one another. For they themselves, the Pagans, hate one another." This is very true when you take into account what Paul writes to Titus. Prior to coming to Christ, we spent our days hating, devouring, destroying one another, but once we've come to Christ, there is an ongoing love for the believers. "Behold how they love one another and how they are ready to die for each other. Whereas the Pagans themselves are ready to kill one another."

It was Easter 1977. A young lady desperately unhappy at the time had been invited to visit a worship service at a church. She came to that church. It didn't take long for her to be struck by the love that existed, she could sense between the people there; by the peace they had when they talked of Christ. About five years later, I married that woman. It was that love, that uncommon love that attracted and caused people to want to stay within the fellowship of that particular body of believers. So there is an uncommon love that should be characteristic of the saints. I sense that here. I would encourage you to excel still more.

Last and finally, there is an uncommon presence. There is an uncommon presence that occurred here. The text tells us that there was a sense of awe. There was a fear, an ongoing realization that something supernatural was taking place here. Now again, keep in mind, this text describes an event that occurred prior to the completion of the Scriptures. Hebrews 2:4 tells us that many wonders and signs were being performed. Acts tells us that there were wonders and signs taking place, there were healings. But the biggest sign, the biggest inducement to our fear and wonder occurred in Acts chapter 5 when Peter supernaturally discerns that Ananias and Sapphira were lying to the Holy Spirit. They claimed to have brought the entire proceeds from the sale of a

piece of property, and in fact, they had kept back a portion of it. We don't know the specific details, but God allowed Peter to understand and discern that. And as you know the story, the Holy Spirit struck them both separately dead, casting them out of the church. Very likely they were believers, but they were subjected to this chastening, this severe chastening. And it is this that attracted and compelled the greatest amount of awe, shock, and wonder within the believers at this particular time. That is what took place immediately before the passage that says, "None of the rest dared join them."

They realized as a result of what was taking place that there was a commitment that was being made when they became members. Part of that commitment (and there is the essence of this in what happened to Ananias and Sapphira) is to the ongoing process of church discipline. Calvin says that the essence, the *sine qua non* of the church exists where you have three things. The word is taught, the sacraments or ordinances of baptism and the Lord's Supper are carried out, and church discipline takes place. John Owen added to that evangelism occurs. Some of you have experienced ungodly implementations of church discipline. Some of you need to heal from that, some of you need to realize, "As a result of that, I need to be a part of the church that rightly implements church discipline." But this will be a part of the ongoing work of the Holy Spirit in His church, in purging it, in causing people to repentance.

Why do we do church discipline? Because there is enough of that uncommon love that causes us to speak into the lives of each other when we know that we need to be encouraged and challenged to follow Christ. When we know that the divorce that is beginning is going to destroy that individual's life and those children's lives. We care enough to speak in and rightly implement church discipline. So, it's that wonder, that ongoing fear that takes place. The uncommon presence of God was also demonstrated by the fact that they somehow or other were experiencing a supernatural rapport with the people around them.

We need to always keep in mind that about us, there needs to be a certain winsomeness. A certain quality of life that says, "Okay, I'd like to sit down and have time sitting over coffee with Stan and Lisa Stewart or Quintin Smith." But there is that winsomeness about us that should be present. Put another way, the only offense, ideally, that we should cause should be the offense of the cross. If anyone takes offense at you for any reason, let it only be because your life demonstrates the offense of the cross. God can make that happen. We're not deliberately trying to win friends and influence people. We're trying to live out the presence of Christ in our lives.

Last and finally, that good presence, that uncommon presence of God is demonstrated in ongoing, day by day evangelism. The Lord added to their number those who were being saved, and as they were being saved. The normal response on the part of those believers, the text tells us, this was taking place on a daily basis. They were being brought into the church. Believers need to understand: We don't do well separate and apart from the fellowship of other believers. So the uncommon presence of God was being demonstrated in an ongoing evangelism. People were attracted to the love that they experienced and saw. People were attracted, as the Holy Spirit worked within them, to the teaching of the Word of God. They were attracted to the fellowship; the *koinonia* that took place.

So you have the uncommon passion, the uncommon pleasure, the uncommon pursuit of love for each other, the uncommon presence, a sense of the presence of God within that group of believers. How do we wrap this up? Yesterday, Chris and Jeremy gave me a brief tour of the city and I was able to go see something that, doing my homework about Chilliwack, I'd wanted to see. Right in front of your museum, you have a statue. The statue is of a man wearing a skirt. Not really. He is a bagpiper with a helmet at his waist and he's wearing a kilt. Just a little over a hundred years ago, James Cleland Richardson, he had moved from Scotland to Chilliwack, had lived here about maybe a little bit more than a year and a half, if that. He had joined the Canadian Armed Forces and gone over to Europe to help fight in World War I. It was October 8, 1916. The battle was that of Ancre Heights. The British Army was pinned down by intense fire, and they were in the trenches. Piper Richardson realized what was happening. He went to his superior and obtained permission to do what he did. Got up out of the trenches, started calmly and deliberately playing the bagpipes as he walked up and down in front of the trenches and what he played was the call to action. They called it "Over the Top". The demonstration of his courage and the sound of the music, which if you're Scottish, you will fully understand the bagpipes, and his example motivated his cohorts. They jumped out of the trenches, they charged and they took the enemy position. It proved to be a very crucial step in that particular battle of the war. Later that day, Piper Richardson was killed, but not before he had led his friends and they obtained a victory in that particular battle. Any time you hear the Word of God taught, any time you hear Jeremy stand up here and speak or any of the other men that God may place, it should be understood as a call to action. You're hearing the pipes. The Scripture tells us we are not to be hearers of the Word only. We are to be doers. So you and Chilliwack, be doers of the Word of God. Always consider what action the Scripture is calling you to.

Now, in this case, this text will dictate the form of that action. It calls for us in joy to be tempered by self-examination. We want to look at our lives. Are we truly continuing in devotion to the Word, in devotion to the fellowship, in devotion to meals, to the ordinances, sacraments of the church? You take choice in terms of terms. Are we continuing, are we passionate in our love for prayer and our love for the music of the church? Are we continuing to experience the love for the brethren that this text describes us? I sense it. I pray that it will always continue to be the case. Are we continuing to have pleasure in being together and experiencing all of this? Are we continuing to experience the ongoing presence of God through the preaching of His Word, through the living out of the dynamics of true Biblical fellowship? May that always be the case. So, let's close in prayer and then I'm gonna turn it back over to Jeremy.

Father, I just thank you so much for the privilege of being here and being able to communicate Your Word with your people. Father, I pray that the good work that has begun in this fellowship will continue until the day of Jesus Christ. Your Word promises in Philippians 1:6 that that will be the case. Father, we pray that in everything this group of believers will resound to Your glory for decades and even for centuries to come should the Lord delay the return of Christ. Father, we thank you for what we've experienced today. We pray now that as we leave this, as we move on to the next stage of our service and as we leave this place later, that Your presence would rest upon each of us and we would experience Your joy, Your love and Your power through Your Word. Amen.