

## Fifth Mark of Maturity: Fellowship Involvement

*“Weekly faithfulness in worship, involved with a small group, and a one to one accountability relationship, so personal growth, equipping, love, accountability, and belonging are being experienced (Acts 2:42, 46-47; 20:7; Heb. 10:24-25; 5:11-14; 2 Tim. 2:2; Eph. 5:19).”*

Our fifth Mark of Maturity focuses on three Christian fellowship relationships: weekly corporate worship, participation in a small group, and a one-person to one-person growth and accountability relationship. These relationships are necessary and critical to maximize one’s growth in Christ. To grasp the critical nature of these relationships we need to establish a foundational principle of Scripture.

### A Foundational Principle

It was one of my first chapel services the summer I began seminary. The speaker was both an Old Testament professor and our Greek professor. He outlined Abraham’s pilgrimage from Ur to Canaan, and each of the revelations Abraham received from God. He then stated what has remained extremely vivid in my mind: “God’s plan for salvation was not a long succession of individual conversions but the calling of a people.” That insight is foundational. This is the reason that the Bible was written not to individuals but to the people of God and then to the Church of Jesus Christ. One of the greatest obstacles Western Christians face in understanding the Bible is that we think so individualistically. We are the home of the “rugged individual,” the home of the pioneers who made their own way. We have the tendency to approach our salvation, our interpretation of Scripture, and our place as a member of the people of God the same way. As a result, we miss and misinterpret the nature of being a Christian. How? We think that we can be a Christian all by ourselves, isolated, and unincorporated. We think we do not have to take up our part in the people of God. We are convinced that one can be a Christian apart from the Church. To our utter amazement the answer is that you can’t be a Christian apart from being a part and being in the Church of Jesus Christ. Jesus did not die for individuals but for His Church, His people. Here is the starting point of understanding our fifth Mark of Maturity—Fellowship Involvement.

*“But you are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, His own special people, that you may proclaim the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light; who once were not a people but are now the people of God, who had not obtained mercy but now have obtained mercy” (1 Pet. 2:9, 10, NKJV).*

*“Now, therefore, you are no longer strangers and foreigners, but fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household [family] of God” (Eph. 2:19, NKJV).*

The Reformation affirmed in their every confession that this was the case. The following two statements are from first the Westminster Confession and the second from the Second Helvetic Confession:

“1. All saints being united to Jesus Christ their head, by his Spirit and by faith, have fellowship with him in his graces, sufferings, death, resurrection, and glory:<sup>1</sup> and, being united to one another in love, they have communion in each other’s gifts and graces,<sup>2</sup> and are obliged to the performance of such duties, public and private, as to conduce to their mutual good, both in the inward and outward man.<sup>3</sup>

2. Saints by their profession are bound to maintain an holy fellowship and communion in the worship of God, and in performing such other spiritual services as tend to their mutual

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<sup>1</sup> 1 John 1:3; Eph. 3:16-19; John 1:16; Phil. 3:10; Rom. 6:5, 6; 8:17.

<sup>2</sup> Eph. 4:15, 16; 1 John 1:3, 7.

<sup>3</sup> 1 Thess. 5:11, 14; Gal. 6:10; 1 John 3:16-18.

edification;<sup>4</sup> as also in relieving each other in outward things, according to their several abilities and necessities. Which communion, as God offereth opportunity is to be extended unto all those who, in every place, call upon the name of the Lord Jesus<sup>5</sup>” (Chapter XXVIII: “The Communion of the Saints”).

“Outside The Church of God There Is No Salvation. But we esteem fellowship with the true Church of Christ so highly that we deny that those can live before God who do not stand in fellowship with the true Church of God, but separate themselves from it. For as there was no salvation outside Noah’s ark when the world perished in the flood; so we believe that there is no certain salvation outside Christ, who offers himself to be enjoyed by the elect in the Church; and hence we teach that those who wish to live ought not to be separated from the true Church of Christ” (Chapter XVII: “Of the Catholic [Universal] and Holy Church of God...”).

The three fellowship relationships pointed to by our fifth mark are built upon this fundamental principle of Scripture: we are saved in Christ to become part of a people. Once this fact is established, then the three relationships of fellowship become self-evident, but until we realize the non-negotiable nature of this premise we will not and cannot put the right foot forward in our growth in Christ. Let me give you some examples of common statements made, which reveal that the speaker does not understand the above principle. “I don’t believe in organized religion all that matters is that I believe in God.” “You don’t have to go to Church to be a Christian.” “I don’t go to Church because I just don’t get anything out of it.” “I’m just too busy to go to Church.” “Sunday is the only day I can rest and sleep-in; besides the games are always on Sunday.” “I don’t go to Church because I don’t get along with people that well so I avoid groups of people.” “I read my Bible at home and get more out of it than going to Church.” Why are these responses so dangerous? Why do they reflect the failure to understand salvation? Because they make the Church optional at their own discretion. They fail to see the Church as the people of God, as the only ones who are able to worship God in Christ, as the ones God has called to do this. They fail to see their non-negotiable part, responsibility, and obligation as a member of Christ’s Body. They refuse to follow God’s plan for the growth of every true Christian.

Some might ask is this what the Bible really teaches? It is so interwoven in the fabric of Scripture that we often read it without recognizing it. For example, every epistle in the New Testament (NT) is directly or indirectly addressed to the Church. The letters to Timothy and Titus are instructions to the leaders of the Church. 2 and 3 John are addressed to individuals, but it is in their home that the Church meets, and one of the individuals is the leader of the Church. Even more the NT epistles address the internal dynamics and the work of the Church. When Jesus appears to John in the Revelation He says, take these letters down for my churches. We must understand that the New Testament addresses the Church. The Gospels are the only partial exceptions for they are written as evangelistic tracts to persuade the nonchurched to become Churched, i.e. to embrace Jesus and to be united to Him. It is the Church alone that is commissioned to take the Gospel to the world and disciple the nations. It is the Church alone that is invited to gather with the Lord at His table and proclaim His death until He comes. He doesn’t say go home and do this in the privacy of your own house, but rather do this when My people gather together in My name. When you gather in My name I will be in your midst (Mt. 18:20). We are not to pray “My Father” but “Our Father which art in heaven.” We cannot understand anything which Scripture teaches, if we do not realize that there is no such thing as “Lone Ranger” Christians in Scripture. There is no identity for one being in Christ apart from being a part and in the Church. There is only the Church. In this corporate context we find our individual identity in Christ. We are individual members, parts of the Body of Christ. We are family members of the family of God; we are living stones of His Temple, etc., etc. What is God’s plan for a Christian: His Word, His Spirit, and His Church.

Ephesians 4 is God’s blueprint for His Church, i.e. how His Church is to work.

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<sup>4</sup> Heb. 10:24, 25; Acts 2:42, 46; 1 Cor. 11:20.

<sup>5</sup> 1 John 3:17; Acts 11:29, 30; 2 Cor. 8 & 9.

*“4 There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called in one hope of your calling; 5 one Lord, one faith, one baptism; 6 one God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in you all. 7 But to each one of us grace was given according to the measure of Christ's gift. . . . 11 And He Himself gave some to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, and some pastors and teachers, 12 for the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ, 13 till we all come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a perfect man, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ; 14 that we should no longer be children, tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, in the cunning craftiness of deceitful plotting, 15 but, speaking the truth in love, may grow up in all things into Him who is the head--Christ-- 16 from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by what every joint supplies, according to the effective working by which every part does its share, causes growth of the body for the edifying of itself in love” (Eph. 4:4-6, 11-16).*

The first point is that the Church is united because they share the same oneness: Spirit, Hope, Lord, etc. Second, Christ has given to His Church the fourfold ministry: apostles, prophets, evangelists, and pastor/teachers. Third, these gifts are to equip the Church so that the Church can carry on the ministry of Christ. Thus, the Church will be edified, built-up. This edification will be characterized by three specific characteristics: one, they will believe the same thing, i.e. the apostolic doctrine, the faith, the truth. Two, they will all have a personal knowledge of Jesus Christ; they will all personally know Him, not about Him, but know Him. Three, they will grow into the character and statute of Christ Himself. The fruit of this threefold edification or Church growth will be that false teaching will not deceive them because they are doctrinally knowledgeable, and because they are steadfast in what they believe. Consequently, they speak the truth in love, and it is this truth, which enables them to grow up in all things in the likeness of Christ. This is the pattern for all the members of the Body; thus each member is continually built-up by the equipping ministry of the fourfold ministry, the joints of the Body. As each member is individually equipped and enabled, each lovingly exercises his or her gift(s), thus each does their part so that the Body continues to grow and then grows more and then grows more and more. . . !

Perhaps you might be thinking that my introduction is an over kill, but I do not think so because Evangelical Christianity has too often a weak view of the Church. Revivalism of the 18th and 19th centuries and parachurchism of the 20th century have intentionally and unintentionally eroded and perverted the truth about the Church. They did this and do this 1) to avoid being encumbered by issues which they perceived only inhibited evangelism, 2) to justify their own ministries, and 3) to avoid denominational controversies. With all the good they have done, their teaching and perpetration of a weak view of the Church is not part of that good. Because revivalism and parachurchism have been so influential, Evangelical Christianity now perpetrates the same view that salvation is apart from the Church, that there is growth in Christ apart from the Church, that independence from the Church is permissible and acceptable. If we think this way, then we will fail to grow in the three fellowship relationships represented in our Fifth Mark of Maturity. We tend to forsake these relationships because we think them optional. When we begin to think Biblically about the Church, and when we begin to see the Church's non-optional place in God's plan, then we will be positioned to take these needed steps of growth. Otherwise, we often must be *sold* on it like an option when buying a new car. Do we really need this? Can I live without? Does it really justify the expense? But, if we see it as non-optional, essential, that the car won't work without of it, that it won't run right, that it will fall apart without it; then you won't have to be sold. If you want a car you have to have it. This is the way we must view our relationships in the Church.

### **The Three Fellowship Relationships**

Here are the three relationships once again:

1. Weekly faithfulness in worship,
2. Involved with a small group, and
3. A one to one accountability relationship.

I want to explain how each of these relationships is founded in Scripture, what it is, and how we can develop it.

We find these three relationships spoken of in numerous passages of Scripture; we see them depicted throughout the life of the Church in the New Testament. Acts describes the infancy of the Church, and from its inception we see these three relationships materialize again and again and again. In Acts 2:42-47 we see the first two relationships.

We are told, *“And all those who had believed were together”* (v. 44). They gathered together in two specific ways. First, *“day by day continuing with one mind in the temple”*(v. 46), was their large gathering in the porticos of the temple. Here the apostles preached the Church fellowshiped, celebrated the Lord’s Supper, and prayed together (v. 42). Second, we are told that *“breaking bread from house to house, they were taking their meals together with gladness and sincerity of heart, praising God...”* (vv. 46, 47; cf. Acts 12:12, 13:1ff.). This was the Church gathering in smaller groups.

The third relationship we see throughout Acts more implicitly. It spilled over from Jesus’ ministry. In the Gospels we see that Jesus sent His disciples out two by two (Lu. 10:1ff.; Mk. 6:7ff.). Further, we see an internal grouping within the twelve. We find Peter, James, and John repeatedly named together (Mt. 17:1; 26:37; Mk. 5:37; 13:3). John experienced a unique relationship with Jesus described as the beloved of the Lord (Jn. 13:23; 19:26; 20:2; 21:7, 20) and the disciple who rested at the heart of Jesus (Jn. 13:23, 25). This relationship enabled John to have privileged access to Jesus (Jn. 13:22-26). Paul instructed Timothy in this last relationship: *“The things which you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses, entrust then to faithful men who will be able to teach others also”* (2 Tim. 2:2). Thus, throughout Acts we see teams of disciples bound together: Peter and John (3:1, 3, 4, 11; 4:13, 19), Barnabus and Saul (11:22-30; 13:2), Paul and Barnabus (13:42, 43, 46; 15:2, 35-40), Paul and Silas (15:40; 16:19, 25, 29; 17:4, 10, 14b; 18:5), Judas and Silas (15:22, 27, 32), Barnabus and Mark (15:39), Paul and Timothy (16:1), etc. An Old Testament (OT) principle laid the foundations for these types of relationships. *“Two are better than one because they have a good return for their labor. For if either of them falls, the one will lift up his companion. But woe to the one, who falls when there is not another to lift him up. Furthermore, if two lie down together they keep warm, but how can one be warm alone? And if one can overpower him who is alone, two can resist him. A cord of three strands is not quickly torn apart”* (Eccl.4:9-12).

All the gatherings of the Church, whether as few as two or three (Mt. 18:20), a handful (e.g. Acts 13:1) or gatherings of several thousands (e.g. Acts 2:41-44), are addressed in the admonition of Hebrews 10:24, 25. *“. . . Let us consider how to stimulate one another to love and good deeds, not forsaking our own assembling together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another; and all the more, as you see the day drawing near”* (Heb. 10:24, 25). Here we find that the gatherings of the Church are (1) not to be neglected<sup>6</sup>. These gatherings are for the purpose of (2) thoughtfully prepared brothers and sisters<sup>7</sup> coming together<sup>8</sup> (3) to stimulate<sup>9</sup> one another (4) specifically to love and (5) good deeds. Then, (6) to also encourage<sup>10</sup> one another to draw near to God (v. 22). Such drawing near to God also included holding fast the faith (v. 23), forsaking sin and rebellion to God, and thus fleeing from judgement (vv. 26 ff.). It continued by pursuing faithfulness and perseverance in the face of persecution (vv. 35 ff.), and considering all these issues in light of the sobering fact that Christ’s coming is a day nearer with every passing day (v. 25).

The admonition of Hebrews 10:24, 25 states not only the command for not neglecting one’s involvement in the life and fellowship of God’s people in all its forms and relationships, but it also states several reasons why we are to be actively involved in the life and fellowship of the Church. The bottom line is that God has

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<sup>6</sup> “Not to forsake”, *enkataleipo* = to forsake, abandon, desert, leave helpless.

<sup>7</sup> “Let us consider,” *katanoeo* = to understand fully or consider thoroughly.

<sup>8</sup> “Assembling together,” *episunagoge* = an assembling or gathering together, also used of gathering the elect for the rapture, Mt. 13:27; 2 Thess. 2:1; also based on the root for synagogue or congregation.

<sup>9</sup> “To stimulate,” *paroxusmos* = to sharpen, to provoke, to arouse, to stimulate, to stir up.

<sup>10</sup> “Encouraging,” *parakaleo* = to call to another at your side, to encourage or exhort them, to cheer them on, to urge, to admonish, to entreat.

provided no other context for Christian growth apart from His Church. The means of that growth are the Spirit, the Word, and the Fellowship of the Church, but we find that growth described as happening only within the context of the life of Church not apart from it. Thus, it must not be neglected!

## 1. Weekly Faithfulness in Worship

The weekly gathering of the Church on the Lord's Day (Sunday) was such an accepted practice that it was hardly mentioned specifically in the New Testament. Because it was such an expected and accepted norm we find it most often mentioned indirectly. Hebrews 10:25 rebuked those who were forsaking the gathering of the Church, and undoubtedly this was with primary reference to the Lord's Day meeting. In other places we simply read, "*if a man comes into your assembly. . .*" (Jas. 2:2); "*when you come together as a church*" (1 Cor. 11:18; 4:17, 33, 34); "*if the whole church assembles together*" (1 Cor. 14:23); "*When you assemble, each one has a psalm, has a teaching. . .*" (1 Cor. 14:26). In some places we simply read, "*greet the church that is in their house*" (Rom. 16:5; cf. 1 Cor. 16:19; Col. 4:15; Philemon 1, 2) which meant greet the church which meets in their house.

The instructions given in Hebrews 10:24 and 25 (noted above) make it clear that the Church gatherings had a clear horizontal purpose, i.e. members ministering to members. Paul's first letter to the Corinthians also heavily emphasized that the Lord's Day gathering was for mutual ministry to one another (cf. 1 Cor. 11:17-34) especially by the exercise of one another's spiritual gifts—"*since you are zealous of spiritual gifts, seek to abound for the edification of the church*" (1 Cor. 14:12, cf. 4, 5, 23, 26). Both to the Ephesians and the Colossians, Paul exhorted that they should be "*speaking to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody with your heart to the Lord*" (Eph. 5:19). Weekly worship was a gathering devoted "*to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer*" (Acts 2:42; cf. 1 Tim. 4:13; 2 Tim. 4:1-5; Acts 20:6, 7). Within this practice of the mutual ministry of gifts to each other, there was a dynamic interacting of the members of the Body resulting in the loving edification of the Church (Eph. 4:11-16). But, we are taught that the weekly gathering of the Church was not only horizontal, but it was also vertical.

The primary reason for the Church to gather was its vertical dimension—worship given to God. As Ephesians 5 continues we see the growing emphasis on worship to God—"*singing and making melody with your heart to the Lord; always giving thanks for all things in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ to God, even the Father. . .*" (vv. 19, 20; cf.: Col. 3:16, 17; Acts 2:46, 47). Peter pointed out that the exercise of spiritual gifts only benefited one another secondarily. Primarily, the exercise of spiritual gifts was for the glory of God—"*Whoever speaks is to speak, as it were, the utterances of God; whoever serves is to do so as one who is serving by the strength which God supplies; so that in all things God may be glorified through Jesus Christ, to whom belongs the glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen*" (1 Pet. 4:11). The primary reason for the Church's gathering was to give glory, worth, weight, honor, worship to God. Revelation 4 and 5 depict heavenly life around the throne of God. There, we find that in the presence of the living God all heaven can only respond to such worthiness, such majesty, and such beauty by worship. The Church on earth is to be no less so involved— "*. . .whatever you do, do all to the glory of God*" (1 Cor. 10:31). All horizontal activities always serve the Church's primary activity of worship (cf. Rom. 12:1; 14:6-8).

Jonathan Edwards in his treatise, *The End for Which God Created the World*, has a single theme and conclusion: "the end of the creation is that the creation might glorify God. Now what is glorifying God, but a rejoicing at that glory he has displayed. . . .The happiness of the creature consists in rejoicing in God, by which also God is magnified and exalted" (in John Piper, *God's Passion for His Glory*, p. 32). Edwards is saying that God created so that His creation might enjoy and rejoice in His glory, i.e. the weight, the beauty, in the wonder and the worth of God. God willed this end because as we rejoice in Him we find our true joy and in this God rejoices and is truly blessed. ". . .As his happiness arises from...the creature's exercising a supreme regard to God. . .in beholding God's glory, in esteeming and loving it, and rejoicing in it" (p. 33). John Piper put it in his own words, "God is most glorified in us when we are most satisfied in Him" (p. 47). In reflecting on this end

Piper draws out two implications which we can apply to our Fifth Mark of Maturity. The first is the implication of worship, and the second is the implication of hell.

Piper writes of the first, “The essence of authentic, corporate worship is the collective experience of heartfelt satisfaction in the glory of God, or a trembling that we do not have it and a great longing for it.” If God is most glorified when we are truly happy and rejoicing in Him, then worship should be the supreme expression of our joy and God’s delight in our joy in Him. Piper continues,

“The basic movement of worship on Sunday morning is not to come with our hands full to give to God, as though he needed anything (Acts 17:25), but to come with our hands empty, to receive from God. And what we receive in worship is the fullness of God not the feelings of entertainment. We ought to come hungry for God. We should come saying, *“As the deer pants for the water brooks, so my soul pants for You, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God”* (Ps. 42:1-2). God is mightily honored when a people know that they will die of hunger and thirst unless they have God.

“Nothing makes God more supreme and more central in worship than when a people are utterly persuaded that nothing – not money or prestige or leisure or family or job or health or sports or toys or friends – nothing is going to bring satisfaction to their sinful guilty, aching hearts besides God. This conviction breeds a people who go hard after God on Sunday morning. They are not confused about why they are in a worship service. They do not view songs and prayers and sermons as mere traditions or mere duties. They see them as means of getting to God or God getting to them for more of his fullness – no matter how painful that may be for sinners in the short run” (p. 41).

When we gather for worship we do so to seek God in this gathering of His Church. He promises that He will be there in our midst (Mt. 18:20; cf. Rev. 1:12-16). This gathering is like no other. We come to seek our greatest happiness which is God Himself revealed to us in the face of Jesus (2 Cor. 4:6). We sing praises to Him; we gather around His Table to celebrate His Supper; we cry to Him for our needs and the needs of others; and we come to hear His Word preached and have His Spirit apply it to our lives. Such worship cannot be done alone (Mt. 18:20); it must be done in the gathering of His Church! This is the business of the Church to seek God in worship and finding Him to enjoy and rejoice in Him.

The second implication stands in direct contradiction to the first. “Hell is unspeakably real, conscious, horrible and eternal—the experience in which God vindicates the worth of his glory in holy wrath on those who would not delight in what is infinitely glorious” (p. 38). The exact opposite of the Church’s worship is hell. There you will find no one rejoicing in the glory of God because they would not in this life. The inhabitants of hell will be cursed by an eternal joylessness. No, not simply joylessness but rather emptiness, no, utter emptiness, abandonedness, forsakenness, and this state compounded by not God’s joy in them but the utter terror of His unspeakable wrath.

Think with me. If a Christian’s greatest joy will be rejoicing in the glory of God amidst His saints, and a Christian forsakes it on earth, what is he or she really practicing for? Isn’t it a “no-brainer?” To grow in Christ faithfulness in the weekly gathering of His Church is not optional it is essential. That is why God has commanded it! So the first step into the fellowship of his Church is “weekly faithfulness in worship.”

The development of “weekly faithfulness in worship” is not simply showing up, but it is showing up both prepared and purposed to glorify God in the activity of worship. As the Church gathers for worship its worship is to give a vivacious testimony to the living Christ and the God in whom we believe. We testify that our God is a wondrous and holy God to whom we are devoted and in whom we delight. We give testimony that the Christ we serve is not theoretical or simply historical but personal, life transforming, and present in the midst of His Church. If the worship of the Church is less than this it fails to be true worship. Worship is the testimony of our great salvation. Worship is the natural expression of one who has been truly converted, i.e. to know what being lost really is, to understand from what and to what we have been saved, to recognize that our salvation is solely and completely by the grace of God. Worship is as natural to one saved as thought is to a

rational mind, as the beating of a heart is to human life. The one is the natural working and normal result of the other. Thus, to truly experience this first relationship of fellowship it can never be reduced to “putting in your time.” It is fundamentally the exaltation of our salvation in Christ, the exaltation of our glorious God, and all His graces poured out into our lives. We confess our salvation through all the activities of worship in blessing to God. We sing praises to Him; we gather around His Table to celebrate His Supper; we cry to Him for our needs and the needs of others. We come to hear His Word preached and have His Spirit apply it to our lives. This is worship, which is in Spirit and truth.

Above, I explained that the starting point of the Fifth Mark of Maturity is that God’s plan for salvation is not a long succession of individual salvations or conversions, but it was the calling of a people. God’s plan is a corporate plan, to save a people, who together are His people, and He is their God. Thus, loving one another (Jn. 13:34) is a mark of inherently being this people. It is the evidence that we are not to be a multitude of unrelated saved individuals, but that we have been bound together and made a people inherently and manifestly related!

God has called forth a people in Christ. We find a long list of responsibilities commanded because they are inherent to being this people. Without these becoming realities in our relationships we fall short of God’s calling. Note how God’s people are to be to one another:

- Be at peace with one another (Mk. 9:50).
- Love one another (Jn. 13:34).
- Honor one another (Rom. 12:10).
- Be of the same mind with one another (Rom. 12:16).
- Edify one another (Rom. 14:19).
- Receive one another (Rom. 14:7).
- Admonish one another (Rom. 15:14).
- Greet one another (Rom. 16:16).
- Give the same care for one another (1Cor. 12:25).
- Bear one another’s burdens (Gal. 6:2).
- Forbear one another (Eph. 4:2).
- Be kind to one another (Eph. 4:32).
- Submit to one another (Eph. 5:21).
- Forgive one another (Col. 3:13).
- Teach one another (Col. 3:16).
- Exhort one another (1 Thess. 4:18).
- Stir up one another (Heb. 10:24).
- Confess your faults to one another (Jas. 5:16).
- Pray for one another (Jas. 5:16).
- Practice hospitality to one another (1 Pet. 4:9).
- Minister to one another (1 Pet. 4:10).

What do these commands teach us? If we are in Christ we are part of the people of God, and as such we are inherently related to one another with incumbent responsibilities because we have been made a people, a body, a fellowship, a family. For this reason Peter wrote, “. . . *for you once were not a people, but now you are the people of God. . .*” (1 Pet. 2:10). Fellowship in the Body of Christ is not optional; it is not an add-on. Fellowship is the breath of being in Christ. We are to inhale it and exhale it as a natural part of our existence in Christ.

## **2. Small Group Involvement**

The second relationship of the fellowship of the Church: *involvement with a small group*. The majority of the gatherings of the Church in the NT would qualify as small group gatherings (e.g. Acts 2:46, 47; 12:12; 13:1ff.; Rom. 16:5; 1 Cor. 16:19). The working difference between large group gatherings and small group gatherings is the “*orientation*” of the two meetings. In a large group meeting, e.g. corporate worship, we of

necessity, because of the numbers of people, have a “face to the back of the head” orientation. It is not “face to face” which is the orientation of a small group. This orientation changes the dynamics of the group. Further, small group gatherings were characteristically in homes. It was only in this “face to face” orientation that many of the “*one another*” commandments (listed above) could take place. For example, “*bearing one another’s burdens*” (Gal. 6:2) can hardly be done effectively except face to face.

The purpose of face to face gatherings is not always to accomplish specifically targeted “*one another*” commandments. Small groups may be targeted for activities of ministry or worship or study or caring or prayer or the joy of fellowship. Yet in the midst of these activities the “*one another*” commandments are incidentally obeyed often becoming a serendipity – a joy not sought but gained in the course of pursuing other goals. The fact remains that the “*one another*” commandments could often only be achieved in the dynamics of face to face groups.

Small groups must be small enough so that if you are not present you are immediately missed. They must be small enough, so it is difficult to hide; small enough, so you are known and you know the love of other brothers and sisters in Christ. They create an atmosphere of interchange and interrelationship. In such gatherings gifts are realized and expressed. We are known by name, and we know others by name. We are able to find belonging; and the arms of Christian love surround us. Without the experience of such involvement it is impossible to grow to fullness in Christ.

At Lone Hill we attempt to create small groups in a variety of formats. We try to provide study groups: home Bible studies, discipling groups, Bible School classes. We have formed standing groups in our Shepherding Ministry attempting to draw everyone into a periodic face to face gathering. We have a monthly prayer meeting. We also have a number of fellowship groups: special outings and events, Dinner Fellowship groups, informal meals, retreats. We have ministry groups: missions, buildings and property, leadership, prayer, coffee fellowship, finance, evangelism, etc. With each of these we are attempting to facilitate a “face to face” orientation in the life of the body of believers of Lone Hill Church. The leadership cannot make “face to face” fellowship happen, but we can only attempt to create an environment where it can happen. We want to create an environment where the “*one another*” commandments are obeyed and experienced, and where their incumbent blessings are offered and received.

### **3. One to One Accountability**

The third relationship of fellowship is a one to one accountability relationship. Here, we move from face to face to heart to heart or perhaps eye to eye. We see this type of relationship modeled as the disciples sent out two by two (e.g. Lu. 10:1ff.; Mk. 6:7ff.). We see it characterized in such relationships through Acts (e.g. Paul and Barnabus, Paul and Silas, etc.). We find the rationale for it in the OT rule: “*Two is better than one...*” (Eccl. 4:9-12), and we see it eminently modeled in John with Jesus as he is known as the disciple whom Jesus loved, the disciple who rested at the heart of Jesus (Jn. 13:23, 25).

The preeminent qualities of this relationship are trust, encouragement, and a mutual commitment to growth in Christ. It is not simply a friendship. It is a relationship with a clear purpose. It is a serious relationship, a life changing relationship. Because of its significance it is the most difficult to establish and sustain. Such relationships should be men to men and women to women. Such should offer consistent encouragement and admonition for respective marriages. Its purpose is to encourage and develop hearts for loving and obeying God and the disciplines necessary for personal growth and ministry. It must of necessity grow to sustain confrontation and accountability, which should be islands in a sea of encouragement. We all need those who will lovingly confront us when our thinking and lifestyles turn worldly or foolish. An accountability relationship should stretch us out of our comfort zones and not simply sustain our status quos. Personal growth and conformity to Christ are its goals not simply a good time together. Sometimes the relationship will be between one who is more mature in the faith than the other partner, but at other times it will simply be two brothers or two sisters who both desire to grow, and so they team themselves for that purpose.

The process of this relationship is first learning the history of one another, a mutual sharing and experience together, which turns into trust. Again the relationship is more than an emotionally satisfying friendship. It must be forged by the heat of the study, application, and encouragement of God's Word. Further, it must be saturated in prayer, both of worship and praise, as well as, petition and intercession. These are the waters upon which the ship of sharing and accountability sail. There should be periodic spiritual inventory and goal setting. Yet, the relationship must always honor the pace at which the Holy Spirit moves and grows each partner. We are not the Holy Spirit, and, though such would seem self-evident, most of us in times of zeal or frustration are tempted to assume His place and neglect our own.

The person being held accountable should always establish his or her own issues of accountability. In other words, do not set goals for one another. Each person should set his or her own accountability goals. They should be written (we forget very quickly or remember imprecisely). Each person should also establish how they want to be held accountable, for example, a phone call, a list of questions to be asked, mutual review of budgets, etc., accompaniment through an activity, etc. One popular list of questions asks a final question of all the previous answers given – “Did you lie or avoid the truth in any of the answers you just gave?” Such is the nature of serious accountability. But it also reveals its limitations. We are not policemen for one another, and we can only hold one another as accountable as the other person is willing and desirous of being held. We cannot make other people grow or deal with sin in their life. We can only encourage them and love them as the Holy Spirit does the work of transformation and sanctification. One other note, establish an agreed upon format or agenda for your times together. It is far too easy to become caught up in conversation and never get to the meat of the Word, prayer, or your accountability questions. It is too easy to simply avoid the essentials of the relationship for comfortable conversation. Conclude your time by evaluating how you did and even planning how to improve your next time together.

One of our greatest challenges in our walk is dealing with sin and our application of grace. Sin's very nature isolates us first from God, like Adam in the garden we run. It isolates us from other believers for they are God's people, and our sin prompts us to expect or fear their rejection. Finally, sin isolates us from ourselves. We become driven by our sin and its lusts. We fear and avoid thinking about our sin (it always leads to the same conclusion), so we rationalize and self-justify ourselves. Once there, we just don't want to deal with it because we are afraid or don't know how to deal with it. Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote in *Life Together*, “Sin demands to have a man by himself. It withdraws him from the community. The more isolated a person is, the more destructive will be the power of sin over him, and the more deeply he becomes involved in it, the more disastrous is his isolation. . . .In the darkness of the unexpressed it poisons the whole being of a person. This can happen even in the midst of a pious community.”

For this reason James wrote that we are to confess our sins to one another (Jas. 5:16). Such a discipline brings and keeps our sin in the light, and sin shuns the light. Confession short-circuits sin's predictable course. Confession is also the gateway to grace. One might wonder, isn't it enough to confess to God (1 Jn. 1:9)? Of course it is, but when sin is persistent or habitual (Heb. 12:1) often it is necessary to confess it to another to find God's healing. Thus, when we have a trusted relationship with another brother or sister we can take that critical step for healing from the ravages of sin. Such a relationship is life giving in a crisis, but if it is not established and nurtured now, it becomes a critical missing support when needed. Something akin to wearing a seat belt. Bonhoeffer was asked to whom should I confess? He responded, “someone who knows his way to the cross,” i.e. someone who knows what forgiveness is and personally knows the healing grace of Jesus.

How do you find a person to begin an accountability relationship? It begins first by you preparing to be a trustworthy, encouraging, loving brother or sister full of grace, who wants to grow in your walk with the Lord. Begin to pray that the Lord will direct you to an equally committed and compatible brother or sister. Further, you can ask our pastors or elders for recommendations. When you believe you have a prospect, approach and tell them of your desire for an accountability relationship, and ask if they would be willing to pray and explore

that possibility with you. Plan a meeting and share any specific goals you have, ask them about specific areas in which they want to grow. If everything seems “go” from this point, suggest meeting together for limited period of time, e.g. a month or three month period, to further test the relationship. Set up an agenda for your times together, and begin.

How will you know if it’s working? There should be growth in both you and your partner and a growing level of trust. What if it doesn’t work? Talk over why it hasn’t, make some changes, talk it over with one of our pastors or elders, or others who are in an accountability relationship. Sometimes one partner’s desire for growth is much more intense than the other partner, or sometimes it is an issue of trust. Such issues are issues of compatibility. You may each need to look for a partner more in line with the level of your growth desire, etc. One last suggestion, don’t quit! Continue to work at building an accountability relationship. When you are successful you will usually find that you experience of growing in Christ has never been greater.

Fellowship involvement is not optional for a true Christian. It is necessary. It is the plan of God for the growth of every Christian. In the relationships of fellowship we practice and experience the “*one anothers*,” thus ever deepening and manifesting that God has made a people to be a people who was not a people (1 Pet. 2:10).