



Session seven: Christianity is a social faith: we grow best together

(Chapter 9)

Goals for Today

1. Understand the nature and need for fellowship
2. Learn tips on how to share ourselves in a way that fits us

Being a spiritual family together is central to Christianity. It is discussed and illustrated throughout the Bible. Let's take a look at how the Bible talks about the importance of community. For now we'll take a look at the New Testament..

To set the stage, it is helpful to understand what Wesley meant by a social faith. Today when we talk about a social faith, or social action, we often mean good deeds to help others in need or to give voice to a need for justice in society. Wesley was talking about something different, though he was very active in righting wrongs in society and helping the poor. Wesley talked a lot about being involved with one another, and required those involved in Methodism to be so.

The primacy of love

Early in the chapter our author writes: "The discovery that the heart of holiness is holy love rather than avoiding sin was huge in my understanding 'plain old scriptural Christianity.'"

- How does this contrast inform your thinking about Christian community? How would a focus on avoiding sin change things?

How we should relate to one another

Rom. 12:10 Be devoted to one another in love. Honor one another above yourselves.

1 Cor. 12:25 ...so that there should be no division in the body, but that its parts should have equal concern for each other.

Gal. 5:13 You, my brothers and sisters, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the flesh; rather, serve one another humbly in love.

James 2:1 My brothers and sisters, believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ must not show favoritism.

Gal. 6:2 Carry each other's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ. Support the weak (1 Thess. 5:14). Be compassionate with one another (Eph. 4:32). Confess your sins to one another (James 5:16). Forgive one another (Col. 3:13).	Accept one another (Rom. 15:7). Pray for each other (James 5:16). Submit to one another (Eph. 5:21). Be kind to each other (1 Thess. 5:15). Bear with each other (Col. 3: 13). Don't slander one another (James 4:11). Don't grumble against each other (James 5:9).
---	--

Wow! That's quite a list. Acts adds to this a good summary of the early social nature of the church:

Acts 2:42–47 42 They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. 43 Everyone was filled with awe at the many wonders and signs performed by the apostles. 44 All the believers were together and had everything in common. 45 They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need. 46 Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, 47 praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.

- Which of the above commands has been an area of successful growth for you since following Christ?
- Which is one of the hardest commands for you at present?

To love add structure

“In the history of making disciples nothing Wesley did was more strategic than the creation of the societies (large congregation), the class meetings (small congregation), and the bands (intimate congregation).”

- How would you describe your involvement in these different types of groups? How satisfied are you in your current participation?
- Add any comments about how your participation in Christian groups has affected your spiritual and emotional walk.

Recognize the benefits of being involved with groups

There is need for balance in Christian growth...there is a role for others in expanding our understanding and thinking, as well as the need for them to help reel us in when we go off on an extreme.

In other words, there is safety in numbers in a good group. It's a chance to maintain balance in growth and stay true to the course

In psychology, when a person comes to us awash in crisis, we offer them structure (cognition) to help calm their agitated emotions, "talking them down from the ledge", so to speak. When they come to us hemmed in with constricting beliefs we offer them freedom (more room for to express their true nature) to help provide pressure relief.

"At my ordination service, the speaker spoke of other people as 'sandpaper in the hands of God' to be part of 'finishing' his servants."

Another benefit of groups is to increase your vision for your Christian life through hearing the stories of others and being with other people with similar beliefs.

- Has any of this been a part of your experience?

The personal pronouns in the Lord's Prayer are all plural. People in AA have noted that the 12 steps are all in the plural also.

- Trick question: How was this important in the Civil War?

Our author essentially describes some people as "loner" Christians and considers this a problem. Do you agree?

Like the image of a fire at the top of today's notes, fellowship helps to keep the fires of faith glowing in our lives. A single log tends not to burn well in a fireplace.

Bonus: Some tips on sharing yourself with others

1. *Recognize that we are all different in our needs for connection*

Almost all schools of marital therapy have some system for describing differing needs for intimacy. Essentially, the typical distinction is between people who desire a high level of intimacy, medium level, and a lesser desire for physical and verbal intimacy. It turns out that people with some of the combinations can make a relationship be satisfactory to both parties, but a person with a high level of desire for closeness and one with a significantly less desire (the two ends of the spectrum) will have a hard time finding common ground without significant work...and even then it may not work, depending on the degree of difference in their desires.

In other words, be aware that you may not be happy with some relationships if there is not enough common ground. We can find a degree of relatedness with most people, but have to be aware not to take someone's distance personally. Set your expectations accordingly.

2. *Share yourself with "balance"*

It is much easier to share yourself if you share something positive about yourself before you share something negative. It cuts down on the feeling of being overly dramatic or excessively exposed. This is particularly true when speaking to a group or someone who does not know you well or about a topic that makes you feel particularly vulnerable.

"My relationship with my daughter has been really good this year, but my son is not speaking to me, and I am worried about it."

“I’m praying daily these days, which I’m really glad about, but my eating has gotten out of control.”

In a more intimate small group that has a high level of sharing I might ask, “What happened good in your spiritual life this week that we can thank God for, and what happened that concerns you that we can pray about?”

3. *Share—check—share*

When getting to know someone you may need to get a feel for the level of sharing they are comfortable with.

Share: put something out there that is just a bit vulnerable, but not so much that you feel too exposed. This can be with an individual or a group.

Check: Watch for the response and see if they share something back with you. Most people will appreciate that you have shared yourself and will try to share what they can back to “keep the vulnerability ground” a bit level. In a sense you’re fishing around for compatibility. If you progressively continue to share yourself with increased vulnerability, you may get to a level where reciprocation lessens. This is your indication not to go further and expect mutuality though it might change with time. This is not an exact process...but the best relationships have a mutuality about them that works.

Share: Continue to share at a level where you feel safe and the other person does too. This may limit some relationships...but the limitation is there organically, and there may not be anything you can do about it.



How to Make Use of Groups

Fundamentally, a group is a kind of workshop, an interpersonal “laboratory” which functions as a miniature community. In this setting we work to interact both freely and openly with ourselves and others, permitting an exploration of aspects of living we all share.

You might look at your group experience as an opportunity to work on any of the following goals:

- I want to communicate better with people.
- I want to try to assert myself, to say “No,” and not to feel overpowered by others.
- I want to be able to trust others, I have been hurt so often in the past.
- I want some feedback about how I come across to others.
- I want to be able to express my feelings and not hold everything inside.

Acknowledge your defenses. Note the price you pay for keeping them, as well as how they have helped you in the past.

- Respond verbally to what is going on even if you are not sure your contribution is “worthwhile.”
- If you feel no immediate identification with the issue under discussion, search yourself for what you **are** feeling.

- Look at what you do with your “energy” as a person. Do you hold yourself in and try to “freeze” yourself, or act out your energy immediately in order to get rid of it? Try to learn how you experience and express your energy physically.
- Spread yourself around and be interested in other members. Members who initially seem least compatible, and even abrasive, may eventually offer the most productive and enlightening encounters.
- Learn to listen...to others and to yourself. Listen for the content of what is said, for the feelings behind the content, and the effect on yourself and others. Also, notice the behavior and tone of voice when someone speaks.
- Practice sharing your feelings...in the here and now. Develop a feelings vocabulary and learn to use “I” statements rather than “you” statements. (i.e., “When you said that, *I found myself feeling upset.*” Not, “*You made me upset.*”)
- Learn how to give feedback to others. Try to offer comments in response to theirs when appropriate.

Things to Avoid in Group

- Clobbering others over the head with your feelings instead of owning them and expressing them appropriately. This is especially true of judgmental feelings, which have no place in group.
- Trying to deal with others’ feelings instead of your own. Address your own feelings first, then you will see more clearly how to offer feedback to others.
- Worrying about “doing it just right” or being afraid to speak up. It’s not worth it, and you will have a dull group.

Homework

1. Read chapter 10
2. Continue to pray that you will get from this course the results you need