

When you hear someone say the word “fellowship,” what comes to mind? For some people, they can’t help but think about a church potluck or getting together to eat some food because fellowship times have to include food! For the really pious ones, it includes fine coffee!!! For other people, fellowship is about getting together to talk. A time of fellowship means having a social time. It is an opportunity for people to chit chat, catch up on what is going on in life, and spend time together.

But when Paul uses the word *fellowship*, he isn’t thinking about food and socialization. In fact, the word that he uses is ‘*koinonia*’ – a word that can mean fellowship, partnership, participation, or a close bond. It has the idea of sharing something in common (Acts 2:42), sharing in Christ’s sacrificial death in our partaking of the Lord’s Supper (1 Cor. 10:16), or sharing with those who are in need (Heb. 13:16; Rom. 15:26). The only food involved at a fellowship time was the Lord’s Supper – an expression of our partnership in Christ Jesus!

I think we need to recapture this word *koinonia* so that we might be shaped more deeply by it in our work of the mission of Christ. So what does true Christian fellowship look like?

### **Let love drive our partnerships**

When Paul begins this letter, you wouldn’t even know how much difficulty he is experiencing as he begins to pen this letter. He is in prison, chained to guards. People are talking about Christ to hurt Paul. But what drives Paul is his love. He doesn’t begin his letter by bemoaning his situation. He doesn’t vent to the Philippians that he is under arrest, waiting and waiting for a fair hearing. He’s not complaining about the Roman justice system.

What drives Paul is his love – four times he will mention how he is thankful for them all in vv. 3-4. He was deeply moved by this church that had started with the generosity of a businesswoman named Lydia who had opened her home for gospel ministry. She gave Paul and his travelling companions a place to launch their ministry in the region. And as a result of it, Paul had a deep affection for this church.

So deep was his love for this church he could say, “I hold you in my heart” (v. 7) with heart longings (v. 8). But this wasn’t just some warm way to start a letter, but the reality of what flowed from Paul’s heart. These weren’t just warm fuzzy emotions; these were deep rooted joys because of how the Philippians had stood with Paul in his defense and confirmation of the gospel.

What we see is how deeply Paul loved the gospel. He loved these Christians so deeply. This church had been started out of the generosity of others, and that generosity had only continued. These Christians were committed to Paul and his church planting priorities, so much so that they were a significant financial partner, something we will explore in more detail in a moment. But they had also had a longing for Paul, something that spurred him on when he was in prison.

There's something about a partnership that is not rooted in finances but in love. For most of our western missions mindset, we are more accustomed to financially supporting a missionary partner. We have a little bit of a relationship with the missionary, but our primary obligation is money. And missionaries can't do the work without significant financial partnership. But the basis of Christian missions is a deep rooted partnership of love that flows both ways.

One of the reasons we want to significantly partner with missions partners is because we want to have this kind of relationship with them – a kind of deep love that strengthens each other. For Paul, there was a sense of joy in writing to the Philippians. And for the Philippians, there was a deep sense of kinship with Paul. But there was more than just warm feelings from Paul to the Philippians and from the Philippians to Paul.

## **Let Grace Drive Our Partnerships**

Twice Paul uses the word *koinonia* to describe their partnership here. And there are two treasures that have driven their partnership that go beyond financial support. Yes, the Philippian church had been big supporters of Paul so that when he was in need, they came through with financial support. In fact, these are the things that drove the Philippians to support Paul so deeply and caused Paul such love in his heart for them.

First, they are partners in the gospel from the first day. When Paul came to Philippi, Acts 16:14-15 tells us that when Lydia heard the message that was preached, she opened her heart to respond to the message.

Paul will unpack what the gospel is in this letter, and when Paul talks about the gospel, he is talking about the life, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus Christ and what he has achieved for sinners like Paul. He will talk about how the goodness of Jesus surpassed his own efforts and made him realize that his good works were like rubbish compared to knowing Christ.

The second thing that drove their partnership was grace. This grace, Paul will remind the Philippians, ought to pull you out of your self-centered, self-protecting nature and drive our trust in Christ so that we open our hearts to one another. That will be his point in Philippians 2:1-3. This grace pulls people in Christ together, and for Paul, it had pulled the Philippians together with him.

We can see that *koinonia* is sharing of life and partnership in the great work of God by working together. And there are mutual benefits. For Paul, he had a loving support that backed his ministry. But what about for the Philippians?

This is often missed because of how we read the Bible through our own individual eyes. But there are a few benefits that this letter spells out about the partnership. First, Paul could say that their partnership in the gospel would be brought to completion. In other words, what God had begun, Paul was confident it would be completed. Why? Because the grace of God was

stronger than any division that they experienced. Paul was confident that it was a work of God, not merely a work of human effort. So he can say in v. 6 that he is confident that their partnership will result in good things, including their own salvation being worked out. This brought Paul joy – that Christ was being glorified in their lives and it encouraged him. Let's not underestimate how sharing our lives will bring about great joy in one another. Christ's work will bring about mutual encouragement.

The second benefit of their partnership was that the Philippians were encouraged by Paul's ministry because they didn't just share money but people as well. In Philippians 2:25 we hear that the church had sent Epaphroditus to care for Paul when he was suffering. And the benefit was that when Epaphroditus came back to the church, they would be encouraged by his reports.

There is something profound about this kind of partnership. Too often Western missions has seen the partnership as one way. But we need to see that God will work through our partners in us if we will embrace a more biblical model of partnership. Partnership isn't one way – it is two way. Paul loved the Philippians and the Philippians cared for Paul. Paul shared the gospel and the Philippians shared their lives.

What might happen to us if we see that fellowship in the gospel isn't primarily about money, but about the mission of God? What might God do if our primary objective wasn't just money but caring for the person? And what might happen if money wasn't the primary driving factor in our partnerships, but love and grace?

Maybe we would be surprised that missions isn't something that is one way, but two way. What might God be pleased to do among us?