

The Spiritual Disciplines

Fellowship & Confession

“Two are better than one, because they have a good reward for their toil. For if they fall, one will lift up his fellow. But woe to him who is alone when he falls and has not another to lift him up! Again, if two lie together, they keep warm, but how can one keep warm alone? And though a man might prevail against one who is alone, two will withstand him – a threefold cord is not quickly broken.” (Ecc 4:9-12).

The Disciplines are not intended to be performed in isolation. Even in solitude we’re never truly “alone” but always in the presence of Another. Indeed our entire Christian lives are built around the idea of togetherness, community, and sharing. Clearly we need one another and truly we are better together. The Disciplines of fellowship and confession are “social Disciplines” and afford us the opportunity to thrive in community as we experience the blessings of interdependence and discover the joy of being a member in Christ’s Body.

Fellowship

In today’s Christianity “fellowship” is often nothing more than another term for “socializing,” typically involving a meal and/or fun activity. In biblical usage, however, fellowship is distinct from socializing. While it’s true that all who fellowship are socializing, not all who socialize are necessarily involved in fellowship. For the believer fellowship involves a deeper level of intimacy than socializing can offer.

1. *First and foremost, true fellowship requires the common ground of belief in Jesus (1 Jn 1:3).* For John, it is unthinkable to have genuine, biblical fellowship with God through his Son Jesus and not have fellowship with other believers (and vice versa). Fellowship is not some casual acquaintance with others by way of a common religious association. Rather, *fellowship is a devoted alliance between individuals who actively participate in a mutual spiritual heritage.*
2. Because we share in the same life Source, have the same spiritual DNA, and consequently belong to the same spiritual family, *the goal of fellowship is to encourage one another toward Christlikeness (Eph 4:15-16).* Put differently, you cannot grow alone! As each family member actively participates in the growth of other family members, primarily through serving from one’s spiritual giftedness (1 Cor. 12:7-11), the entire organism gets stronger. The gifts of the Spirit (all of which we need) are to be administered in the context of community, both church and unchurched.
3. *Vibrant, healthy fellowship keeps us from spiritual malnutrition, which can result in apostasy (Heb 10:24-25).* This text is a strong warning to those who think they can live their spiritual lives apart from biblical community. In essence, fellowship is God’s gracious means of preserving our spiritual lives. [Note: The text warns against *habitual* neglect of biblical community (“as is the habit of some”), not an occasional respite due to burn-out or church abuse.] Fellowship is God’s spiritual lifejacket to weather the storms of life. When tempted to abandon our confession of faith because of torrential storms, biblical community is God’s way of reeling us back in to shallow and safe waters (Jude 23).
4. *Fellowship is one of the means used by God to keep us from the deceitfulness of sin (Heb 3:13).* When we’re living in isolation and apart from biblical community, it’s easier to concoct our own definition of what is sinful and what is not, hence be carried away by the deceitfulness of sin. Fellowship offers a restraining influence so we avoid distorted views and twisted interpretations used to justify sinful attitudes and activities (cf., Pr 15:22; Ps 1).

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Confession

Typically, we don't reveal our moral weaknesses until it is safe to do so. Therefore fellowship, as described above, is prerequisite to "public" confession. Without fellowship public confession becomes contrived, artificial, and ineffective. With fellowship public confession becomes an agent of change in our lives and promotes Christlikeness. When authentic fellowship is experienced in an environment where it's safe to trust others, the Discipline of public confession is easy to implement. However, before public confession takes place there must be "personal" confession before the Lord.

1. *Above all else, we must personally confess "Jesus is Lord" (Rom 10:9-10; Philip 2:10-11).* This means at least three things:
 - a. *Confession means change (2 Tim 2:19).* Without confession there is no repentance and without repentance there is no forgiveness. Confession sows the seeds of change, yields the fruit of repentance resulting in forgiveness and produces a harvest of righteousness.

Excursus: Repentance is far more than a change of mind; it's a change of masters. It is a determined, active response to abandon a lifestyle dominated by sin. In fact, in several instances Scripture indicates repentance is a necessary condition for forgiveness (Lk 17:3-4; Acts 2:38; 5:31; 8:22). Repentance is not only desired but demanded by God (Acts 17:30; 2 Pt 3:9) and was the beginning and end of Jesus' message (Mt 4:17; Lk 24:46-47). Repentance involves turning away from everything(one) that rules our lives and turning to God as the sole Lord, Ruler and Master of all (Mt 6:24; 12:30; Acts 3:19; 14:15; 20:21; 26:20; 1 Thess 1:9).
 - b. *Our confession that "Jesus is Lord" is an ongoing claim we make each and everyday.* If Jesus is Lord at salvation, then he remains Lord throughout our sanctification because "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever" (Heb 13:8).
 - c. *Confessing "Jesus is Lord" promotes a healthy distance from our brothers and sisters in the faith.* Though Scripture tells us to confess our sins to others, we do so because we are serious about change in our lives and need their encouragement. This does not mean, however, that they rule or govern our moral lives since "Jesus is Lord."
2. *Personal confession displays the virtues of intellectual honesty and biblical humility that results in a restored relationship with God (1 Jn 1:9).* Rather than denying that sin is present in our lives (1 Jn 1:8), we continually confess (= admit as true) our sinful behaviors asking for God's pardon. Contrary to some teaching, forgiveness is not unconditional (cf. Ps 32:1-5; Pr 28:13; Mt 6:14-15; and Lk. 17:3 for conditions of forgiveness). *God forgives confessed sin.* Nevertheless, we must not confuse conditions with causes. Our confession does not cause God to forgive; it is the condition He set and enables. Anyone who teaches believers to merely accept God's forgiveness, without meeting the condition of confession, profoundly misunderstands how a healthy family relationship operates. Jesus insists we must regularly seek God's forgiveness (Mt 6:12).
3. *Public confession nourishes our sense of being loved by others and promotes physical and spiritual healing in the Body of Christ (Jm 5:16).* The Discipline of public confession shows that the vitality of the church Body is contingent, to some degree, upon its transparency. Because God heals and forgives (Jm 5:14-15) we can safely confess our sins to one another. When we do this regularly (note the present tense in vs. 16 suggesting habitual practice) we experience God's affirming love from our spiritual family and the blessings of restored

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physical health. In times of illness it is always appropriate to examine our spiritual lives. Unconfessed sin can be a burden to the body as well as the soul (**Ps 32:3-5**). Although we need not publically confess all sins, James likely has in mind those sins that are committed publically (cf. **Mt 5:23-26**), especially those that result in physical brokenness (cf., **1 Cor 11:30** for an instance of physical sickness tied to sin. Alternatively, not all sickness is directly related to personal sin, cf., **Job; Jn 9:2-3**. See also **2 Cor 12:7-9** for an instance of God not healing despite fervent prayer.).

4. *Public confession promotes intimacy with others and breaks through the artificial, manufactured, and frivolous social arrangements often encountered within church. Confession makes restitution possible and promotes consonance rather dissonance in relationships (**Heb 12:15; Jm 3:14-16**). And, where there is restitution we find peace that exemplifies genuine community (**Mt 6:14-15; Lk. 17:3**).*

Reflection/Direction/Decision

- What comes to mind when you think of “fellowship?”
- How does identifying your spiritual DNA promote a healthy sense of fellowship?
- Do you confess “Jesus is Lord” daily? Exactly how does that look in your life?
- What areas of your life are mastering you?
- How is fellowship different from socializing?
- Who can you trust to reveal your weaknesses and confess your sins?
- In your own words, explain the relationship between confession, repentance, and forgiveness.
- Describe a time when public confession brought spiritual and/or physical healing.