



The Fellowship Factor

I Kings 9:25
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Today is Community Church Sunday, the time each year when we celebrate our religious heritage. Unlike denominational churches, nondenominational Community Churches do not have well-defined identities in the eyes of the public. Most folks know what a Catholic service is like. Most know that Martin Luther, the instigator of the Protestant Reformation, has something to do with Lutheranism. Most know that Baptists baptize adults believers by immersion and so forth.

When I was a kid a fellow student in one of my Sunday school classes asked a question when we were learning about the various denominations. He said, "If people who go to a Baptist church are Baptists, and people who go to a Methodist church are Methodists, would people who go to a Community church be Communists? I'd offer a more diplomatic way to refer to Community Church members, except that it has already been taken—Congregationalists.

Indeed, for its first hundred years The Church in Aurora was known as The Congregational Church in Aurora. In a congregationally governed church the authority is vested in the congregation—not in a bishop or pope. The congregation owns its building and not a synod or diocese. As our Code of regulations puts it, "The members of this church shall have the undisturbed right to follow the Word of God according to the dictates of their own consciences."

We believe in God and Jesus and the Bible to be sure, but we believe that you are Holy Spirit empowered to hear and follow God's Written Word and Incarnate Word. We believe. In you—to a degree that makes us distinctive from denominationally governed churches. Otherwise, we are pretty much like them and we seek to cooperate with them as we are doing this summer when the local Catholic Church will meet in our sanctuary for morning mass while their parking lot is being paved. By the way, the Catholic Church just reproduced the lead article from our May newsletter in their newsletter celebrating that spirit of cooperation.

So member churches of the International Council of Community Churches tend to extend to others the same charity that we claim for ourselves—the freedom to follow God's Word. We respect those who are different and even rejoice in the richness of

religious diversity that characterizes the Land of Freedom. This helps to explain one other characteristic of Community Churches. We are committed to Christian Unity. One response to the fact of religious diversity is to protect God by eliminating the infidel other. Don't have to look too far to see that kind of response.

But there is an alternative, and Community Churches practice it. It is to preach and embody Christian Unity. Other denominations do this as well, but not quite to such an extent. That is why Community Churches are represented in ecumenical institutions all out of proportion to our diminutive size in comparison with the much larger denominations. Hence Brother Ashmall's predecessor, Michael Livingstone, was President of the National Council of Churches, while I was President of the OCC.

We have come to realize that Christian Unity is a meaningless concept unless we get together to worship, study, serve and fellowship. That means, first and foremost, getting together with other Community Churches. Toward that end we hold an Annual Conference each year somewhere around the country—this year in our own backyard of Columbus, Ohio. There will be excellent music, inspiring Bible studies and worship, banquets, tours and all the things you'd expect at a conference like this. Beyond that there is an interracial and intercultural opportunity, which was cutting edge back in the early 50's when a merger of predominately black and white congregations became the Council.

But I don't think that any of those things account for what brings folks back time and again to the Annual Conference. The real draw is what I call "The Fellowship Factor." There are council folk who only see each other once a year for a couple of days. But you would think that they have been the closest of friends for a lifetime. As soon as they come through the hotel door they greet one another with a big hug and pick right back up where they left off a year before.

There's a pastor who cuts out of the early morning Bible study just like I do. We started noticing each other at breakfast, and then we started eating together, and now it is just understood that we are meeting every morning to talk about church people and theology and the latest fiasco at the prior day's plenary session. This has been going on for years and we are fast friends even though we are only together a couple of meals out of each year.

The title of our message for today is "The Fellowship Factor." It is a big factor in the kingdom of God as we will see. Indeed the life to come has been described by Jesus as a big banquet, and by church tradition as a glad reunion. We are going to explore the biblical emphasis upon fellowship by considering a single verse of scripture, just like last week. Last week was Mother's Day and we considered a single verse of scripture. But it had to do with motherhood and that, as we noted, is a subject pregnant with possibilities. So too is the fellowship factor.

Let's see what the Bible says about it in our brief verse, which reads: *Three times a year Solomon sacrificed burnt offerings and fellowship offerings on the altar he had built for*

the Lord, burning incense before the Lord along with them, and so fulfilled the temple obligations (Verse 25). Let's begin with *the temple obligations*. All Hebrew men (which came to involve their families) were required to make a pilgrimage to Jerusalem three times each year to celebrate the Feast of Unleavened Bread (or Passover), the Feast of Weeks and the Feast of Tabernacles.

The Feast of Tabernacles, or Booths, is so named because the pilgrims brought along their own lodgings in the form of tents, or tabernacles. There weren't enough hotel rooms in Jerusalem to accommodate all the pilgrims, so they brought their own lodgings which were found dotting the landscape. Now I want you to imagine packing up a tent and extra clothes and some food and hiking to Cleveland's Public Square. Or packing it down to Akron's Canal Park, or, for some, all the way to Columbus and the State House Lawn.

Now imagine doing it three times a year. But everybody did it because: 1) it was a religious obligation and, 2) it was a rip-roaring good time. It was more like a big family reunion. Folks would set up their tents in tribal enclaves and as close to loved ones as possible. Maybe you had a beloved son or daughter who married into another tribe and this was your chance to see each other and catch up. Farmers would attend workshops on yields and techniques. Winemakers would bring their latest vintage. And shepherds made a killing selling sheep and goats and bulls and other critters required for certain sacrifices.

You will note in our text that burnt offerings and fellowship offerings were specified according to temple obligations. Burnt offerings might be grain or olive oil or fat and entrails from animals. These offerings created quite an aroma which wafted into the skies and was considered pleasing in God's nostrils. There are other kinds of offerings besides, which are not specified here, such as wave offerings. These were sheaves waved and not burned because they went to the priests as compensation for their services.

But the offering we want to focus upon here are what our text calls *fellowship offerings*. These might be bulls or goats or sheep that are sacrificed on the altar, but then the carcasses are further butchered and cooked for consumption by the pilgrims and priests together. In other words, a huge barbeque for days on end with plenty of wine to gladden the heart and fresh baked bread slathered in olive oil. Yummy doodle! No wonder people happily packed up their booths and headed out on the road toward the three big fellowship feasts.

And God provided for all this in his law, called the Torah. In fact the phrase, fellowship offering, is found 130 times in the Old Testament, and fellowship offerings (plural) another 147 times. Our text is only one of those references, but these offerings are a big deal because fellowship is a big deal in both Testaments. Indeed, in our New Testament lesson you will note how our fellowship with God is linked with our fellowship with one another.

John writes: *We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard, so that you also may have fellowship with us. And our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ. And again: If we claim to have fellowship with him yet walk in the darkness, we lie and do not live by the truth. But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another....* (1 John 1:3-7). Only way fellowship w/ God is fellowshiping w/ other children. That's why God makes such a big provision for fellowship in his Holy Wd.

We make provision for it today as well. Some folks don't realize what an effort it is for some folks to get to church. I think about the Perez family back when their kids were still in a stroller that looked like the Queen Mary rolling into church. Mom/Lisa had just had a newsworthy health event but still they got up on Sunday morning, got dressed and fed and packed into the car to make it to church. And why do they do it week after week. Why, for the superlative preaching—that's why.

No, you won't find a personality cult here. Folks were coming long before I arrived and they will be coming long after I am gone. More than anything else it is the fellowship factor that brings us back—fellowship with God and fellowship with his other children. It is what brings folks back to this church and it is what brings folks back to the Larger Church. The Larger Church is that fellowship of Community Churches we know as the International Council of Community Churches.

A few weeks ago when we showed our appreciation for our church school teachers, we mentioned that there was a whole other church meeting in this building while we were worshiping in the sanctuary—a church every bit as big as in this sanctuary. Comprised of teachers, staff and students it is in the classrooms upstairs, downstairs and over at the youth annex. In the same way, there is a whole other church that meets each year that is a part of us.

We don't send the entire congregation, although we did send our Chancel Choir when the Annual Conference was held in Cleveland several years ago. But we do send members to represent us. Most recently we have sent Bob and Toni Harris as our voting delegates, along with either me or Rev. Horak. Before the Harris' was dear Elaine Duncan who went faithfully every year. Before her was Sister Dorothy Hale, who attended for decades representing us. Even after the advancing years took their toll and she was no longer able to attend, so many would greet me at the Annual Conf asking, "How's Mrs. Hale?"

Before Dorothy there was Barbara and Brad Holt who attended the Annual Conference from The Church in Aurora. Barbara was the first woman President of the Council, as was a former pastor of our congregation, Rev. JR Hutcherson. So we have quite a history with the Council. Who will represent us next? Now that Toni has retired from that role, only Bob is left—and he is no spring chicken. It is Bob who reminds the pastor that it is time for Community Church Sunday. It is Bob who stuffs the pew racks with special offering envelopes. It is Bob who established an endowment fund for the

Council, which is how he came to be awarded the council's Layman of the Year award (a couple times I think).

Who will represent us in the years to come? If you feel led to consider that longstanding and exalted role, now would be a good time to attend the Annual Conference while it is in our backyard of Columbus, Ohio. The church pays your expenses—it's that important to us. See Bob or me after church and we will help you experience the fellowship factor with the Larger Church just as we do here at The Church in Aurora.