

Fellowship

SCOTT HOEZEE

An architect once told me that back in the early 20th Century, most church narthexes were designed for just one thing: Just enough room to hang up your coat on the way in, and just enough room to grab your coat on the way back out the door. It was a pass-through space. There was no room to linger and presumably no desire to linger, but by the end of the 20th Century, churches began to add onto their buildings, and what was the number one thing most churches added? A large fellowship hall. People now wanted space to linger, to socialize and to share meals. Now, fellowship may not seem like a spiritual discipline, but seen the right way, it is; and today on *Groundwork*, we will ponder the discipline of fellowship. Stay tuned.

DAVE BAST

Welcome to *Groundwork*, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Dave Bast.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And I am Scott Hoezee; and Dave, we are now coming to the final program...the seventh program in this seven-part series...our second series on *Groundwork* on spiritual disciplines. The first series we did covered a lot of the ones we often think about, like fasting and so forth. This one has covered things that we don't always think are disciplines, like keeping the sabbath...

Dave Bast; Right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Or keeping our commitments, but they really are; and today we are going to think about fellowship, which doesn't seem like a discipline, but I think we will see that there are reasons why it can be and should be seen that way.

DAVE BAST

Exactly; and in our last program, we talked about the discipline of reconciliation or peacemaking, and how difficult that can be...how challenging; but it is intimately connected with what we want to talk about today, the practice or the experience of fellowship; and very often the one is based on the other, or fellowship won't happen until there has been reconciliation.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DAVE BAST

So, we will talk about that connection to some degree, but first let's just think a little bit about the meaning of fellowship and some of the background in scripture about it. It might seem that you would go instantly to the New Testament, and the fellowship of the Church, but actually, biblically it is much deeper and longer than that to trace the meaning of this term.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; in our next segment of this show, we will do that, we will go to the New Testament; but let's start with that Old Testament background. Now, it depends a little bit what translation or what version of the Bible you use, but in most Bibles, the word *fellowship* pops up eighty-five times in the Old Testament, and always,

always, always in the same connection, namely the name of an offering that you could bring to the Temple and offer: the fellowship offering. Now, some Bibles call it the peace offering, and that got me to thinking about why. So, I dusted off my somewhat dusty Hebrew and what was the word translated as fellowship or peace? I checked it out with a colleague of mine who knows Hebrew better than me, because it looked to me like it was the plural of the word shalom, which doesn't make a lot of sense. We don't talk about shaloms, or if we are talking about peace we don't talk about peaces. You've got pieces of a puzzle, but that is a different spelling. So, it is kind of odd, the plural of shalom...*shalamim*...is what is the fellowship offering. That is not really translatable, which is maybe why we have rendered it fellowship, but isn't that interesting, Dave? Fellowship has roots in shalom, which we thought about in the reconciliation program, too.

DAVE BAST

Yes; I think there is something significant there. I think you are on to something, Scott, just with that word study; but it also reminds me of a series we did on the book of Leviticus, where we looked at those different offerings, and all the rules and regulations, and it all seems so esoteric and so far-fetched to us, killing animals and burning them on the altar, and the priests in their vestments and their robes, but I think we can really get into the thank offering or the peace offering or the fellowship offering, because it was distinctive in a couple of important ways, one of which was it was voluntary.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; all the other offerings, for sin and everything else, were mandatory. This was something everybody had to do. Only the fellowship offering was voluntary, and when did you do it? You did it when you were particularly joyful...when you were really overwhelmed with gratitude. God came through for you in a big way, or you were just so delighted that you have this good relationship with the Creator of the universe—the God of Israel—with Yahweh, that you just want to just sort of gush a little bit; and so that is when you would bring a fellowship offering. So, this was the only offering you did out of sheer delight...not required...

DAVE BAST

Right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

You didn't have to do it. You did it because, wow, I've got fellowship with God. So, it is called a fellowship offering, founded on peace. I have this peace with God, and so, wow, that is why I'll do it. When I take it to the priest, I know I don't have to do this, but I want to! There is something lovely about that.

DAVE BAST

That is why it is often connected with thanksgiving for some special act of gratitude, you know. God has done something great for you or to you, and you want to give back to him somehow so you bring this fellowship offering; but there is a second aspect to it that is kind of interesting, too, and that maybe connects directly with our fellowship halls in our churches that you talked about. This was the only offering that the person who made it was allowed to eat or invited even to participate in by eating, because these were animal sacrifices, or sometimes grain...bread was offered...but in any case, there was a meal involved here.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, isn't that something? All of the other sacrifices require the complete consuming of the meat...the bird...the grain...whatever it was that you brought. That is what made it a sacrifice. Something of value had to be given up completely, but not the fellowship offering. They would just burn a little bit of fat on the altar and then cook the rest of the meat and then you could eat it. You could share it with the priest, you could share it with your family, you could share it with the poor and the needy. Right; when we think fellowship in the Church today, we think of breaking bread together, and this literally could happen. In fact, here is how this offering is described in Leviticus 7:

¹²If they offer it as an expression of thankfulness, then along with this thank offering they are to offer thick loaves of bread made without yeast and with olive oil mixed in, thin loaves made without yeast and brushed in oil, and thick loaves of the finest flour, well-kneaded and with oil mixed in. ¹³Along with their fellowship

offering of thanksgiving, they are to present an offering with thick loaves of bread made with yeast. ¹⁴They are to bring... (and it goes on and on, and then the meat, you know, you could eat it; in fact, you needed to eat it all right then and there).

So, bread, meat...sounds like a meal, right? Again, this is the only sacrifice you actually were allowed to consume.

DAVE BAST

Yes, and different kinds of bread, that is kind of interesting, too.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, two without yeast and one with.

DAVE BAST

Yes, what the significance of that is, but I think I would rather eat the one with yeast. It is going to be a little more filling; and notice it is described as an expression of thankfulness. It is also called this thank offering. So, it is a welling up—an expression of gratitude; and Scott, we saw in the last program that God is the primary agent of reconciliation. It is always God who takes the initiative, and for Israel, God was the God of covenant. God was the God who had shared his name through Moses with his people: Yahweh...the Lord...the one who makes promises and keeps them...the God who is faithful...the God of steadfast love—of *chesed*—and *emeth*—and faithfulness; and so, our initial, instinctive worship is a response to all this. It is to give thanks to this God who has fellowship with us that he himself has established, and we say in gratitude to him: Yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes; by the way, one other occasion for offering this fellowship offering or peace offering was when you had fulfilled a vow, and God enabled you to fulfil a vow, a promise you had made, and it worked and it happened, and you came through and God came through, and there again, out of the fullness of your heart, you would offer that. So, all that is some of the deep background in the Bible from the Old Testament that this fellowship ties in with peace, with having great joy and having a great relationship with God; but of course, in the New Testament, fellowship is used also with some frequency, but in a different way, and yet in a connected way. So, in just a moment we will turn to the New Testament.

Segment 2

DAVE BAST

I am Dave Bast, along with Scott Hoezee, and you are listening to *Groundwork*, where today we are wrapping up a series on some of the more unusual spiritual disciplines, or perhaps less thought of as spiritual disciplines; and we are talking about the discipline of fellowship, which, as we have seen in the Old Testament, is a form of the word shalom or peace as expressed in the fellowship or the peace of the thank offering under the Law; and in the New Testament, the word is also one you might be familiar with. If shalom is the only Hebrew word most of us as Christians know, then maybe the only Greek word we really know is *koinonia*, and that is the word in the New Testament for fellowship.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And it is a famous word. If you Google it...go ahead, do it, Google it...you will get six million hits; and although some of those hits on *koinonia* will be dictionary definitions of the word, mostly what you will find is Koinonia School, Koinonia Ministries, Koinonia Church, Koinonia Farms...a place for everyone according to the ad...Koinonia Institute, the *koinonia* praise band, the Koinonia Coffeehouse; in fact, Dave, a couple of years ago, a 14-year-old young man named Karthik Nemmani won the National Spelling Bee by correctly spelling the last word of the competition, and it was *koinonia*.

DAVE BAST

That is amazing research, Scott...

SCOTT HOEZEE

It's Google...it's Google...

DAVE BAST

I really have to compliment you on that one; but okay, *koinonia*...its root is *koin*?, which means common; common not in the sense of ordinary, not common as opposed to special, but common as opposed to private...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DAVE BAST

Common, that which is held by all. So, the Boston Common is that green park in the middle of the city that everyone belongs to; the *Book of Common Prayer* in the Anglican tradition doesn't mean it is kind of ordinary, everyday; it means it is prayer to be expressed commonly or by all together. So, that is *koin*?,

SCOTT HOEZEE

And we encounter it most famously perhaps in Acts Chapter 2. It is at the end of the Pentecost sermon that the Apostle Peter delivered after the Spirit was poured out; and then we read this in Acts 2:40 and following: With many other words, Peter warned them; and he pleaded with them, "Save yourselves from this corrupt generation." ⁴¹Those who accepted his message were baptized, and about three thousand were added to their number that day. ⁴²They devoted themselves to the Apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. ⁴³Everyone was filled with awe at many signs and wonders performed by the apostles. ⁴⁴All the believers were together and had everything in common. ⁴⁵They sold property and possessions to give to everyone who had need. ⁴⁶Every day they continued to meet together in the Temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, ⁴⁷praising God and enjoying the favor of all people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.

DAVE BAST

So, they devoted themselves to the *koinonia*, Peter says here...or Acts says, after Peter's sermon; and they had everything in *koin*?—in common—they were a community; they practiced an early form of communism, or perhaps we should say communitarianism, because it had very little in common with later communism, what we think of; but all of this emphasis on the mutuality of their life, on the exchange of possessions and goods so that nobody was in need. It is kind of an idyllic picture of the early Church, isn't it?

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, and it doesn't last real long either. I mean, the early Church eventually gives way to some squabbles, and we are only a couple of chapters away from Ananias and Sapphira, and so forth. You know, to this day, we tend to yoke fun, food, and fellowship...we put those three things together...fun, food, and fellowship. I guess they were having fun, but they certainly had food, and they certainly had fellowship; and so that was again, sort of... On the last program, Dave, we talked about reconciliation as being both vertical and horizontal. This is sort of the horizontal plane. We are kind of flipping it. We began with the vertical plane with reconciliation...how we get made right with God. Now we have started with the horizontal plane of people in the Church having everything in common, but that, Dave, is rooted in that vertical dimension of God. Here is the blessing at the very end of 2 Corinthians:

^{13:14} May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.

And that is echoed by John in his first letter: 1 John 1:

³We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard, so that you may have fellowship with us, and our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ. ⁴We write this to make our joy complete.

DAVE BAST

So, that striking phrase from 2 Corinthians, it is often used as a benediction at the end of a worship service...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, we have heard it many times.

DAVE BAST

The grace of the Lord Jesus, the love of God, and the koinonia of the Spirit—the participation in the Spirit. The fact that we have been united with God and Christ through the person and work of the Holy Spirit. So, our commonality with the Spirit...the fact that he has come to indwell us...is what also unites us through the Spirit with the Son and the Father. The fellowship is our very life with the Triune God.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Which is amazing, and it does return us earlier in this series when we thought about the discipline of prayer. We talked about how prayer is conversation and conversation is rooted in relationship and how Adam and Eve just walked with God in the garden in the cool of the day. Their conversation with God was so natural before sin marred everything. Well, here we sort of get a return to Eden, that we have been restored in our fellowship with God. The Holy Spirit, right, is the conduit to give us a relationship with the fullness of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. So that is quite amazing. So, when we get that blessing that “may the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you,” that packs a punch...

DAVE BAST

Yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

That says it all. That is the gospel in just a couple words.

DAVE BAST

Or you think of John’s statement, to unpack that just a bit more. John says: The reason I am writing this...and you could expand that to the whole New Testament...is so that you will have fellowship with us...so that you will be drawn into relationship with us, and *our* fellowship is with the Father and the Son. So again, as you said, Scott, it is starting with the horizontal; as the Apostles and their successors reach out and invite people into this fellowship we call the Church, they find that in being united on this horizontal level, they are also going to experience fellowship or koinonia with God the Father, the Son, and God the Spirit as a result.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Exactly; it is kind of in the spiritual DNA of us as followers of Jesus Christ, having this fellowship founded on the reconciliation we thought about previously; but, Dave, a good question is: So, how is fellowship a discipline? It looks more like something that just kind of spontaneously bubbles up at a party or at a youth group retreat, or it is a potluck at church in an aptly named fellowship hall. It doesn’t sound like a discipline. So, in what sense is it, or does it need to be at times also a discipline? Well, we will conclude the program and this series by thinking about that in just a moment.

Segment 3

DAVE BAST

You are listening to *Groundwork*, where we are digging into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Dave Bast.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And I am Scott Hoezee; and Dave, we have been talking about fellowship...fellowship offerings in the Old Testament, koinonia in the New Testament, but how is this fellowship? How do we construe it as a discipline, since that is why we put it in this series? In a sense, Dave, you could say that calling it a discipline almost takes the fun out of fellowship.

DAVE BAST

Yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

You may as well talk about having the discipline of eating ice cream. If anything, you need a discipline *not* to eat it...

DAVE BAST

Right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

It would kind of take the fun out of ice cream to say it is a discipline to eat it. So, we don't want to take the fun and the effervescence out of fellowship, and yet, it can be a task—a discipline—a habit.

DAVE BAST

Yes; you know, earlier you said something about food, fun, and fellowship, the things that go together. So often in our churches...in our church life...you know, when we are putting a notice out for some event, those are the things we highlight...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DAVE BAST

So, it is sort of like, oh, yeah, I want to go there.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Do you want young people to show up? Order pizza.

DAVE BAST

Exactly; but I think we can all understand there are times and ways when we kind of have to work at fellowship; when we have to commit ourselves to it as a discipline because it is the right thing to do. In one sense, that is true of every one of these things we have talked about in this series. It is the right thing to do. It is going to promote our spiritual health and wellbeing—our wellness. It is going to deepen our relationship with God. It is going to draw us closer to the example that Jesus has set for us, because he did all this stuff; he is the basis for all of it; and fellowship can be like that, too, because frankly, in our society it has some pretty stiff headwinds that it is fighting against.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes; we are called to be rugged individualists. Robert Putnam is his name; he is a sociologist. He wrote a book whose title became very famous...the title probably became more famous than the book. Lots of people who never read the book knew the title, which was *Bowling Alone*. Back in the day, there used to be bowling leagues and there were Rotary Clubs, and Lions Clubs, and associations that brought people together, and those have faded as the 20th Century ended and the 21st Century began; and now it is almost like we are bowling alone. We are lone rangers. Think of all those TV ads you see for Jeep Cherokee or something, where there is one person driving a car up to the top of a cliff, and they get out and ah, they are all by

themselves...

DAVE BAST

Yes, right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And this is the ideal.

DAVE BAST

Or some couple camping on a mountain lake and not another soul to be found. Or the opposite extreme: There is some big crowd or party scene where it is all fueled by overindulgence in alcohol, and everybody is kind of rioting. I mean, the idea of fellowship with God, and therefore, with one another because of our common life in Christ...that is not something that we are attuned to culturally; although perhaps in this season that we have been living through, where we have been cut off from so much fellowship, we have been powerfully reminded that we are creatures who were made by God for community. We were made to find our completion in fellowship with one another.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And for some reason, Dave, I was just reminded of a play written by sort of the existentialist, French philosopher Jean Paul Sartre. The play was titled *No Exit*, and it was set in hell; and there are a group of people locked in a room together. I cannot go into all the details, but the people annoy each other and they get under each other's skin; and at one point, one of the characters says: Oh, now I figured it out...and here is the most famous line of the play...hell is other people. Well, Dave, that is a horrible thing to say because it goes against the truth of what you just said. God actually made us for community. If we regard other people as a problem to be solved and to be escaped from, that is the complete opposite of how God made us in God's own image. So, we have some cultural headwinds; but let's be honest, Dave, and maybe this harks back to the previous program on reconciliation, the other thing that makes fellowship a discipline...something we maybe need to force ourselves to do...is the simple fact of the matter is that we don't always get along with everybody at church; in fact, some people we find downright annoying.

DAVE BAST

Yes, and that is simply the truth. Any time you are involved in a fairly large group, even just a mid-sized group of people, you are going to find individuals who maybe don't naturally appeal to you; they are not your type, as we say, or they rub you the wrong way; or you may be a person who simply doesn't like crowds...you are an introvert. So, then what do you do? Are you excused on that grounds from pursuing the discipline of fellowship? I think that answer is no. I think we have to recognize there is a reason Jesus said love your neighbor as yourself, not your best friend as yourself...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

Dave Bast; Not your spouse as yourself. Because your neighbor is given to you, you don't choose your neighbor...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DAVE BAST

And you don't choose the fellow members of your church. They are chosen for you by God; so, in a sense, it is kind of a laboratory where God invites us to practice the grace of forgiving and being forgiven, of reconciliation, as we talked, so that we can associate together...we can be together as a spiritual family...the family of God...and we can love one another across our differences. It doesn't mean we like everybody. It doesn't mean, you know, you are going to want to date that person; but it does mean we can accept them on the basis of our own acceptance.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; Lew Smedes used to say that you can love people you don't like, and maybe the discipline of fellowship...you know, I mean, maybe in the abstract you might say I don't want to have dinner with Martha; I don't want to have dinner with the Jones, I don't like them; but then maybe you force yourself to go to the church potluck to have some fellowship time, and you might find out there is some likeable stuff about these people after all. There is sort of the famous C. S. Lewis line we have quoted in different connections here on *Groundwork*, Dave, where Lewis said: If you don't love somebody, act lovingly toward them, and sometimes the feeling follows after all. When you act loving long enough, sometimes you begin to feel it, too. So, maybe if we discipline ourselves to participate in the fellowship of the church, we might get to know people in a way we wouldn't have otherwise, and find out there is lots to admire and appreciate about them.

DAVE BAST

And frankly, this is where we are all heading, right?

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DAVE BAST

In the final visions of Revelation, in Revelation 21 and 22, it doesn't really use the word fellowship, but it certainly talks about the thing, where John sees a new heaven and a new earth and the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride for her husband; and John writes: 21:3 I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Look! God's dwelling place is among people and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and will be their God."

SCOTT HOEZEE

Fellowship with God and with one another forever, thanks be to God.

DAVE BAST

Well, thank you for listening and digging deeply into scripture with *Groundwork*. We are your hosts, Dave Bast with Scott Hoezee, and we hope you will join us again next time as we continue to dig deeply into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives.

Connect with us at groundworkonline.com to share what *Groundwork* means to you, or tell us what you would like to hear discussed on *Groundwork*.

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Printed on July 14, 2025