

REAL FELLOWSHIP DEPENDS ON REAL RELATIONSHIPS

By Bob Young

I have written before about the essence of the work of the church. The church must learn how to evangelize, disciple Christians, worship, fellowship, and serve. Those who lead must establish close relationships with those they lead, or their influence will be limited. All of the above must be continually bathed in prayer.

This article is about fellowship. An often-unseen dimension of fellowship is assimilation. New Christians must be included and involved. They must come to feel a part and be a part of the local church. Their talents and skills must be developed (discipleship). In assimilating people into a church, two things matter: the number of groups with which a member identifies, and the size of those groups. Studies have shown that when the number of groups with which a member identifies is seven or more, the likelihood of that person leaving the church is almost zero. The staying power of a member goes down as the number of groups goes down. Successful assimilation requires that each member identify with at least 3-4 groups. The size of those groups is important. Ideally, every member should identify with at least one smaller more personal group. And this is one case in which more is better.

Since fellowship is the dimension of church activity that drives assimilation, the number of groups available and the size of the groups available in a church is important. With regard to the number of groups—more is better. With regard to the size of the groups, smaller is better. You can worship with a large group but you cannot have meaningful fellowship with a large group. Group dynamics show that once a group becomes larger than 10-12 people, one or two will dominate the group, and some – usually the quietest ones – will stop participating. Lack of participation often leads to dropping out of the group.

Unfortunately, creating small groups within your church does not guarantee that people will experience real community. Many groups—classes, small groups, activity groups—only have superficial interactions and have no idea what genuine fellowship is like. They may share conversations, meals, or activities, but they do not share their lives. Small groups that really function in assimilation and biblical fellowship have four characteristics—they are personal, they encourage sharing, they provide support when needed, and they model forgiveness.

PERSONAL

Authentic fellowship is not superficial. It is people sharing hearts, hurts, feelings, and experiences. This only happens when people are honest about who they are and what is happening in their lives—doubts, fears, failures, weaknesses. In a personal, non-threatening context it is possible to ask for help and prayers.

Such is not easy. It requires courage. What if I get hurt, am rejected, or am laughed at? It also requires humility—being willing to admit that we are not super-spiritual people. Why would anyway be willing to participate in such a group? Because it is a path of spiritual growth and emotional health. And because it is biblical (James 5:16). Being honest with others requires that we be honest with ourselves. Not easy, but made easier in personal sharing.

SHARING

Sharing suggests giving and receiving. Groups where sharing occurs are groups where people learn to depend on one another and to support one another. The Bible describes this sharing by comparing the church to the human body. In the human body, every part is important, no part functions all by itself, the parts are interdependent and support one another as they work together (1 Cor. 12:25). Sharing is the essence of fellowship—relationships, responsibilities, reciprocity. Sharing includes accountability and encouragement, serving together and serving one another. Christians are more consistent in their faith walk when they are part of personal groups where sharing is the norm.

SUPPORT

The kind of support that should be built into the small group experience is not superficial. In the context of real, personal, shared relationships we learn to understand one another and touch one another at deeper levels. We share hurts and pain. We share burdens. Support is meaningful only when we share our lives, enter the lives of others, and let others enter our lives. We need one other during times of crisis, grief, and doubt. When life caves in, we need the support of those we know and trust. A small group of personal friends, sharing faith in God, is the perfect support system. In this kind of small group, God's presence is made obvious even when God seems distant.

FORGIVENESS

Forgiveness is hard—for those who forgive, and for those who must be forgiven. Small groups are the perfect place to learn forgiveness. Small groups are grace places. Everyone falters, stumbles, falls. Everyone has to get back on track from time to time. Fellowship that does not include forgiveness is not authentic fellowship. At its best, forgiveness should be coupled with encouragement to go forward and future accountability structures.

Groups where personal relationships are developed, sharing is normal, support is automatic, and forgiveness serves to bring Christians closer to one another and closer to God—such groups are the essence of effective small groups where fellowship is real and assimilation is possible.