

The Grace of Fellowship

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"It is grace, nothing but grace, that we are allowed to live in community with Christian brethren."—Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*

As COVID-19 has prevented us from gathering together for worship, I was reminded of Bonhoeffer's meditations on the value of fellowship.

Bonhoeffer's classic on Christian community was written during a time when the Confessing Church had been scattered under the Nazi regime. As religious freedom evaporated in Germany, Bonhoeffer trained pastors at an illegal seminary in Finkenwalde. *Life Together* records many of his thoughts from his time of fellowship there.

While Bonhoeffer's context of persecution is far removed from our context of social distancing and self-isolation, our inability to gather provides us with a fresh lens to consider his words.

With that in mind, I invite you to read the excerpts from *Life Together* below, and I encourage you to read this book in its entirety during these unusual days apart.

Every gathering of the local church is a gift of God's grace.

Bonhoeffer writes:

So between the death of Christ and the Last Day it is only by a gracious anticipation of the last things that Christians are privileged to live in visible fellowship with other Christians. It is by the grace of God that a congregation is permitted to gather visibly in this world to share God's Word and sacrament.

Not all Christians receive this blessing. The imprisoned, the sick, the scattered lonely, the proclaimers of the Gospel in heathen lands stand alone. They know that visible fellowship is a blessing. They remember, as the Psalmist did, how they went 'with the multitude . . . to the house of God, with the voice of joy and praise, with a multitude that kept holyday' (Ps. 424). (pp19-20)

Whenever we gather together as a church, we receive a gift from our gracious God. Every gathering of the saints provides a taste of the greater reality of heaven, and we look forward to the day when all the saints will be together with our Lord forever.

Consider Hebrews 12:22-24.

But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, and to the assembly of the firstborn

who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.

Gathering together with our family of faith is a blessing that becomes all the more apparent when the gift is taken away. Let us prize the grace we have been given in our fellowship, and look forward to the day when we can know it again.

The scattered look forward with faith.

When we must worship alone, we remember that our union with Christ and our fellowship with the Spirit is not dependent upon our geography. We look to the heavenly fellowship of Hebrews 12:22-24, and know by faith that we worship God with the saints of all the ages.

Those who are unable to enjoy the gift of gathering with brothers and sisters should take heart, for as God gives trials to scattered saints, he refines and reassures his people of their inheritance (1 Pet 1:1-9).

Bonhoeffer writes about those who must worship alone:

But they remain alone in far countries, a scattered seed according to God's will. Yet what is denied them as an actual experience they seize upon more fervently in faith. Thus the exiled disciple of the Lord, John the Apocalyptist, celebrates in the loneliness of Patmos the heavenly worship with his congregations 'in the Spirit on the Lord's day' (Rev. 1.10). He sees the seven candlesticks, his congregations, the seven stars, the angels of the congregations, and in the midst and above it all the Son of Man, Jesus Christ, in all the splendour of the resurrection. He strengthens and fortifies him by his Word. This is the heavenly fellowship, shared by the exile on the day of his Lord's resurrection. (p20)

Throughout history, the church's weekly rhythm has been one of gathering and scattering. We gather on the Lord's Day to celebrate our risen Lord, and we are scattered throughout the week, carrying the gospel to our workplaces and neighborhoods. We regather the following Lord's Day, and continue this rhythm of life.

This rhythm of gathering and scattering serves as a parable. As we are scattered during the week, we are reminded that we are in exile. As we are regathered, we are reminded of the future day when all the saints will be gathered to worship the Lord forever.

For as long as the church experiences this prolonged season of being scattered, we must trust the wisdom and will of our Sovereign Lord, and seek all the more to take refuge in his Word. If persecution and suffering does not remove one from the love of God (Rom 8:31-39), neither will social distancing and stay-at-home orders in these days of COVID-19.

We experience the love and presence of God through one another in Christ.

Do you feel grief or loneliness in this season? It is right to feel a sense of loss. Two-dimensional fellowship through technology is a gift, as was Paul's ability to send and receive letters from prison. However, it is innately unsatisfying as we were created to be physically present with one another.

Bonhoeffer elaborates on this as he describes the blessing of physical presence with other believers:

The believer therefore lauds the Creator, the Redeemer, God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, for the bodily presence of a brother. The prisoner, the sick person, the Christian in exile sees in the companionship of a fellow Christian a physical sign of the gracious presence of the triune God. Visitor and visited in loneliness recognize in each other the Christ who is present in the body; they receive and meet each other as one meets the Lord, in reverence, humility, and joy. They receive each other's benedictions as the benediction of the Lord Jesus Christ. But if there is so much blessing and joy even in a single encounter of brother with brother, how inexhaustible are the riches that open up for those who by God's will are privileged to live in the daily fellowship of life with other Christians! (p20)

God's grace calls us to assemble together to sit under the preaching of the Word, to recognize brothers and sisters through baptism, to confess Christ together at the Lord's Table, to lift up our voices and sing, and to give and receive ministry within our church family as we are built up to become more like Jesus.

As we assemble together as the body of Christ on the Lord's Day, we encounter Christ in his Word and in his people. We know the love of Christ through one another as we serve as his hands and feet. Our gatherings are an incredible gift for us to treasure. It is right for us to desire to be face-to-face with each other. Consider the apostles' great desire to be present with the church (1 Thess 2:18; 3:17, 2 John 12, 3 John 14).

In these days of waiting, many of us will feel the weight of loneliness and the emotions and temptations that accompany feelings of isolation. Let the brokenness of this world lead us to prayer. May we be faithful to pray for one another. May we not be distant with our words, but let us use the communication tools we have to encourage one another.

Let us praise God for this grace!

In today's age of individualism, far too many professing Christians see the gathering of the church as an optional activity, and many others are content with "internet church." Even for those who are faithful to gather, the weekly blessing of assembling together is easily taken for granted.

Bonhoeffer warns against this, and calls the church to thanksgiving:

It is true, of course, that what is an unspeakable gift of God for the lonely individual is easily disregarded and trodden under foot by those who have the gift every day. It is easily forgotten that the fellowship of Christian brethren is a gift of grace, a gift of the Kingdom of God that any day may be taken from us, that the time that still separates us from utter loneliness may be brief indeed.

Therefore, let him who until now has had the privilege of living a common Christian life with other Christians praise God's grace from the bottom of his heart. Let him thank God on his knees and declare: It is grace, nothing but grace, that we are allowed to live in community with Christian brethren. (p20)

Amen! May our hearts awaken to this gift, and respond with praise to God for the grace given to us in our fellowship with one another. May these days of apartness grow in us an abiding thankfulness for our brothers and sisters in Christ. May we learn to truly treasure the physical presence of our church family, so that we may be filled with even greater joy when we gather again to worship our Lord.

