

TRINITY FELLOWSHIP CHURCH

Cardiphonia

Sounds of the Heart: Reflections on the Christian Life

Live Together or Die Alone: A Call to Radical Fellowship

Timothy M. Shorey, 2008

“And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the day drawing near.”

(Hebrews 10:24, 25)

Series Introduction

This *Cardiphonia* series is presented to provide *pastoral counsel with pastoral heart* for today's Christian. This is part of my intentional pastoral commitment to serve more effectively the theological and character growth of those in my care. I've created this medium to help shine more of *the whole counsel of God* into your hearts.

With its title derived from two Greek words—one meaning *heart* and the other *sounds*—our *Cardiphonia* series expresses the *heart sounds* of the pastoral leadership of Trinity Fellowship Church. In the course of life and ministry, pastors hear God speak through Word and circumstance, and gain perspective for the lives of those entrusted to their care. As they meditate on God's Word and care for God's people, God places within their hearts passions, burdens and joys that are intended for God's church. The *Cardiphonia* booklets attempt to serve both the pastoral team and the congregation of TFC by transferring such joys and concerns from our hearts to yours.

I offer this series in *faith* that God will bless any truth it expresses *and* will guard His church from any error that might creep in. I present it with the prayer that it will help provide more spiritual food for the Lord's flock in ways that will bless and strengthen those I love. May the blessing of God rest upon you as you hear these heart sounds expressed.

Yours in Christ,

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Live Together or Die Alone: A Call to Radical Fellowship

Introduction

The Greek word for *fellowship* appears as a noun or verb twenty-seven times in the New Testament. The word family speaks of something shared or held in common or partnered in. Fellowship, a shared life of faith and love, is an essential dynamic of the Christian life. It is *essential* in that it is part of the *essence* of life in Christ: we cannot be in Christ without sharing the life of His body (1 Corinthians 12:12, 13)¹. And it is *essential* in that none of us can get along without it². Literally it is true: we live together or we die alone.

Going Beyond “How Are You?”

It’s been observed often that we Christians know well how to dilute the idea of fellowship. We reduce it to little more than chit-chat over coffee and cake. Churches have “fellowship halls” where we presume fellowship happens because eating and laughing do. Often urged to “stick around and fellowship”, we hang for a few minutes after church events to chat about life, the weather or the most recent developments in sports. We are masters of the superficial,

¹ “All believers share a common life in Christ, whether or not we recognize it. We are in fellowship with literally thousands of believers from every nation of the world. Although we have never met most of them, yet we are in fellowship with them. We disagree with many of them over various issues of faith and practice, yet we are still members of the same Body. Even though we struggle to like some of them, that does not alter the fact that we share together a common life in Christ. Neither our attitudes nor our actions affect this objective sense of koinonia (fellowship). We are in fellowship with all other believers, whether we like it or not--or even recognize the fact. This objective truth of koinonia is meant to provide the foundation for the experiential aspects of fellowship. The realization that we do in fact share a common life with other believers should stimulate within us a desire to share experientially with one another. This is the whole thrust of New Testament teaching on koinonia” (Jerry Bridges).

² “We should not...think of our fellowship with other Christians as a spiritual luxury, an optional addition to the exercises of private devotion. We should recognize rather that such fellowship is a spiritual necessity; for God has made us in such a way that our fellowship with himself is fed by our fellowship with fellow-Christians, and requires to be so fed constantly for its own deepening and enrichment” (J.I. Packer).

engaging in the equivalent of a social dance with a stranger, synchronizing our conversational steps so as to move slightly in each other's direction without stepping on each other's toes or getting too close.

We ask each other "How are you?" but then don't wait around for anything resembling a real answer. If anyone answers with anything but a smiling-faced "I'm fine!" we don't know how to respond and we're quite sure we don't want to. We know that we're supposed to go beyond *how are you*, but we seldom seem to get there.

I wish these last two paragraphs exaggerated churches' fellowship deficiencies, but as I re-read them, I'm startled by how accurately they describe much of *my own* flawed interaction with others. I'm guilty of the sin of shallow fellowship. May I encourage you to feel bold enough in God's forgiving grace in Christ to look hard at yourself to see if you, too, have been guilty of fellowship neglect? Let's realize that grace covers even our failures to love one another in the church as we ought, and with that knowledge let's stare sin in the face so we can see where we need to grow.

One Anothering

Biblical fellowship is fleshed out through a series of New Testament *one anothering* commands³. Numbering over 50, these commands define the breadth, depth and scope of fellowship as defined by God. Through these *one anothers* we see that biblical fellowship cannot be reduced to one-dimensional conversationalism, but must be pursued as a multi-faceted and multi-layered enterprise of love.

In order for a church to care faithfully and fully for its members, it needs to embrace all these dimensions of fellowship and practice them with intentional focus. That said, this booklet is not designed to be a full and balanced discussion of all that fellowship involves; it is designed to explore a particular area of fellowship that is much neglected and needed in our time.

³ For example: Romans 13:8; 12:5, 10, 16; 15:5-7, 14; 16:16; Galatians 5:13; 6:1, 2; 1 Thessalonians 3:12; 4:9; 5:11, 26; 1 Peter 1:22; 5:14; 1 John 3:11; John 13:34, 35; Acts 2:46; 4:32; Ephesians 4:2; 5:21; Philippians 1:27; Hebrews 3:12, 13; 10:24, 25; 1 Corinthians 16:20; 2 Corinthians 13:12; Colossians 3:12, 13.

Selective Fellowship

My experience has been—as I witness my own inclinations and those of others I love—that we tend to be selective in our practice of fellowship. We define and do fellowship in commitment terms with which we are most at ease. We choose aspects of fellowship that fit our personality most readily, make our friends most comfortable, or avoid the tasks most unpleasant.

But the thing about one anothering commands is that they are one anothering *commands*. All of them are imperatives which mean that none of them is optional. So practicing the one anothering is not a matter of personality or spiritual gifting; it's a matter of obedience. All of us must do all these things in whatever sphere of fellowship and responsibility God entrusts to us. God calls us to step into this work with faith that He will enable us as we go.

God Gives What God Commands

Sometimes we avoid certain duties because we fear we cannot do them. When obedience is neither comfortable nor easy nor natural, we are tempted not even to try. It was this battle with moral paralysis that led the early church father, Augustine to pray: “Lord, *give* what you command, and *command* what you will.”

Augustine prays for grace from God so that he might be obedient to God. He asks God to give what He commands. Then in the confidence that God will do just that, this early Christian pastor boldly invites God to command whatever He wills. And he does so backed up with biblical promise:

*“Above all, keep loving one another earnestly, since love covers a multitude of sins. Show hospitality to one another without grumbling. As each has received a gift, use it to serve one another, as good stewards of God's varied grace: whoever speaks, as one who speaks oracles of God; whoever serves, as one who serves by the strength that God supplies—in order that in everything God may be glorified through Jesus Christ. To him belong glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen” (1 Peter 4:8-11, emphasis added).*⁴

⁴ See also Philipians 2:12, 13; 1 Corinthians 12:4-11, especially v.11

It is this confidence that God gives grace whenever God gives duty that can liberate us to enter the world of true fellowship with believing hope.

Where We Are Strong

Typically churches have differing areas of fellowship strength. I'd read our church as strong in caring, comforting, weeping, giving, and bearing-each-other's-burdens types of fellowship. God has given us a spirit of compassion that has been a blessing to many. As a pastor, I am deeply grateful that God has strengthened us to serve one another with tender hearts.

Also we have seen great growth in the ministry of affirmation and encouragement in recent years. God is building into us the ability to see evidences of grace in each other's lives, and to speak both gratitude to others, and praise to God, for that grace. Our Lord is creating a culture of appreciation among us, and it's wonderful!

Where We Are Not So Strong

But as we encounter the *one another* commands of Scripture we are not given the luxury of selective obedience; we have to pursue faithfulness in all that fellowship involves. With this in view we realize that there are aspects of fellowship in which we are not so strong. Particularly I would identify the aspects of biblical correction, warning and admonition. We've yet to fully embrace the Bible's teaching that we are to seek out and offer a ministry of mutual accountability and warning care, such as is encouraged in Proverbs 27:5, 6, 17.

Better is open rebuke than hidden love.

Faithful are the wounds of a friend; profuse are the kisses of an enemy.

Iron sharpens iron, and one man sharpens another.

Proverbs isn't calling us to a ministry of criticism or to a witch-hunt in the church. Rather God is challenging us to notice when brothers and sisters in Christ are caught up in patterns and habits of sin, and to do what we need to, to lead them into the forgiving and transforming grace of God.

Fellowship's Harder Work

This is what I would call *fellowship's harder work*. I say it's *harder*, because, well, other things are easier. If anyone finds this work *easy*, I'd suggest a heart transplant. Frankly, anyone who enjoys wounding a friend is disturbed. People who love find no immediate pleasure in speaking correction or rebuke into the lives of those they love. Parents will know well the experience of disciplining their kids, and being compelled to say to them in the process; "This hurts me at least as much as it hurts you." Why? Because it does.

Not too long ago Tim, a dear friend, brother and pastoral team member, asked me point blank why I don't ask very many hard questions of him or others. He wondered why I seem to avoid that kind of risk-taking care that others need. His was one of those uncomfortable but essential, life-altering questions that provokes the conscience, and challenges faith.

For upon reflection I knew in my depths that the reason I did not do more of this kind of care was because it was risky, challenging and demanding. In short I didn't do it because it was *fellowship's harder work*. God used Tim's question to continue a transforming work in my soul. And then God brought *Hebrews* to mind.

Hebrews: A Mandate for Wounding Fellowship

The *New Testament* letter called *Hebrews* serves at least two functions. It is both a wounding and warning letter, *and* it is also a *call* to wounding and warning fellowship. In this letter the Holy Spirit warns us to stop sinning against, and wandering from Christ⁵, and He also commands us to warn one another, lest any of us should so wander. Here are three key texts commanding the latter:

"Take care, brothers, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God. But exhort one another every day,

⁵ See Hebrews 2:1-3; 3:12; 4:5-13; 10:26-39; 12:18-29; 13:22. In Hebrews 13:22, the author calls his whole letter an exhortation/warning: "I appeal to you, brothers, bear with my word of exhortation, for I have written to you briefly."

as long as it is called ‘today’, that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin...”

“And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.”

“Therefore lift your drooping hands and strengthen your weak knees, and make straight paths for your feet, so that what is lame may not be put out of joint but rather be healed. Strive for peace with everyone, and for the holiness without which no one will see the Lord. See to it that no one fails to obtain the grace of God; that no “root of bitterness” springs up and causes trouble, and by it many become defiled; that no one is sexually immoral or unholy like Esau, who sold his birthright for a single meal.”

(Hebrews 3:12, 13; 10:24, 25; 12:12-16)

Hebrews makes it clear that we are our brothers’ (and sisters’) keeper. What matters to you should matter to me, and nothing matters more than that you (and I) keep on keeping on in the way of Christ.

Live Together or Die Alone

In Hebrews the stakes are high. Read Hebrews 3 and 4 carefully and see that it is so (see also Hebrews 10:26-31 and 12:25-29). Sin takes no prisoners. It deceives, then debilitates, then damns. “When sin is fully grown it brings forth death” (James 1:15).

John Owen used to say, “Be killing sin or sin will be killing you.” *Hebrews* would indicate that this mortification of sin is a community project⁶; a matter

⁶ I must be clear to say that the Bible doesn’t endorse an intrusive community approach to every sin in every believer’s life. There are many sins that Christians commit that are occasional and episodic rather than habitual and enslaving. These occasional sins need only be confessed to God, and, if one desires, to others for additional care and prayer. What the community of faith must be attentive to in one another has to do with habits of sin—sin patterns that threaten to harden a brother or sister in a way of disobedience and unbelief, or harm another person in any way. As a means of grace for one another we

best handled by something akin to a wartime *band of brothers*, rather than by a loose association of lone rangers. We either live together or we die alone.⁷

Do We Save Each Other?

We are not redeemed by each other's ministry, but we cannot stay redeemed or endure in faith without it⁸. Passages like Hebrews 3:12, 13 indicate that if we do not encourage/exhort each other daily, people will be hardened and will fall away from the living God. The redeeming and meritorious means by which we are saved is the blood and righteousness of Jesus Christ alone (that's what Hebrews 5-10 are all about). But the human and here-and-now means by which we are *kept* saved is the fellowship of other believers. Elsewhere, Paul says that through his life and teaching, Timothy would "save" both himself and those who heard him (1 Timothy 4:16). That's a startling statement, but a true one.

In the salvation and preservation of a sinner, God is the ultimate source, power and provider of salvation. But how does he do this? God uses two means. God saves us by means of the work of Christ *and* the work of the church. Jesus is the primary means that He uses to save and preserve sinners in grace. But the church is in a very real sense a secondary means in His hands. He has chosen to keep people saved through the fellowship ministry (and quite often through exhortation, the *harder work* of fellowship ministry) of the church.

must care enough to step into each other's lives and to invite one another in, so that we can help keep each other from the deadening effects of sin habits and patterns.

⁷ "Perseverance of the saints is a community project. Being together in smaller settings, exhorting one another day in and day out over the phone, in person, face to face, in notes, in e-mails. This is not the icing on the cake! We won't survive and go to heaven without it" (John Piper).

⁸ I would want this statement to be nuanced carefully. Fellowship is one of God's *normal means* for keeping people in the faith. Of course there are unusual circumstances in which people are isolated from other believers through no fault of their own, and there may be individuals whose view of the church is so distorted that they neglect seriously the biblical call to fellowship, whom God, in His mercy will preserve in faith anyway. Still, Hebrews and other scriptures make it plain that fellowship is one of God's normal means to keep believers persevering in faith, without which perseverance they will not be saved (Matthew 24:10-12). They would also make clear that when believers neglect such fellowship they will be unfruitful and unblessed, even if saved in the end.

The role that the church plays in the salvation of each member is similar to that played by parents in their children's lives. Parents are not the ultimate life-giver or provider for children; God is. But God gives and preserves life in a child by means of the care and provision of parents. He is the Ultimate means of our children's safety; we are the secondary means.

Likewise as God gives and preserves life in a child by means of the care and provision of parents, so He saves and preserves the salvation of the believer by means of the care and provision of fellowship within the body of Christ. God saves people, but He keeps them saved through us.

Hebrews: A Model of Involvement

As stated earlier, the book of *Hebrews* is both a *call* to warning and exhorting fellowship, and an *example* of it. It calls us to warn each other and it is itself an extended warning. So it models what it commands. If space allowed we could unpack various aspects of such ministry that the author utilizes in this letter.⁹ We would see that he uses a variety of tools in his exhortation appeal to his readers: fear, hope, the love of God our Father, promises, historical examples of what happens to people who do not persevere in faith, and then examples of what God does for those who do.

But more than anything, the author proclaims the surpassing worth of Christ (Hebrews 1-4) and the surpassing work of Christ (Hebrews 5-10) as the chief means to inspire his readers to keep on keeping on in the faith of Christ. This is another reminder that *all* ministry—even warning and exhortation ministry—must always remain *gospel* ministry. All one anothering in the body of Christ must always be thoroughly Christ and cross centered, or it will not be effective ministry at all.¹⁰

⁹ For a more complete understanding of *Hebrews'* call to radical fellowship you may obtain a spring, 2008 series of messages presented by TFC, entitled, *Live Together or Die Alone*. Visit our website to order or download this series.

¹⁰ For more on cross centered living see our Cardiphonia entitled, *Gospel Centered Living from A-Z* as well as C.J. Mahaney's *Living the Cross Centered Life* and Jerry Bridges' *The Gospel for Real Life*.

An Example of Biblical Fellowship and Conversational Care

Rather than provide you with an insufferably long abstract description of this radical warning, exhorting fellowship, I want to provide you with a living model, a real life example of this fellowship in action. I think that what follows (which is largely a transcript of a conversation) will open eyes and hearts to the real, albeit *painful* joy of stepping into each other's lives to wound in order to heal.

Questioning Questions

There is no *one* way to do fellowship. The Bible presents many approaches to personal care for each other's souls. In what follows you will encounter an approach that relies heavily on the use of questions. As you read you may find yourself questioning the use of questions: "Is there a biblical precedent for this? How is this helpful? Will this feel oppressive and intrusive for the one being questioned?"

"Where Are You" Adam?

In the first ever personal ministry and counseling time (Genesis 3:9-13), we find God searching for Adam following Adam's act of disobedience. As God approaches this hiding sinner (which describes all of us to some extent), He approaches him with questions, questions the answers for which God already knew. God asks Adam a series of questions in order to give Adam an opportunity to come out of hiding and to see issues of his heart in ways more helpful than if God had simply come to Adam with a series of corrections or pieces of advice.

The use of questions to help people see the needs and issues of their hearts is a common biblical approach to personal care and correction¹¹. It is not the only valid approach but it is an extremely effective one. One of its advantages (in

¹¹ For a sampling of other examples see God's questioning of Cain in Genesis 4:6, 9, 10 and of Job in Job 38-41; Samuel's probing of Saul in 1 Samuel 15:14; Jesus' use of questions in John 6:5, 6; Luke 24:17, 19; apostolic deployment of questions in James 4:1f; 1 Corinthians 4:7.

contrast to a more informational and advice-giving approach) is that it allows people to hear their own thoughts and attitudes without having to be told them by others. In this way, under the blessing of the Holy Spirit, the process of conviction goes on more personally and directly.¹²

What follows is an example of how the use of questions helped me see issues in my own life. I do not think I would have seen these things as clearly if I had been approached by someone loaded with observations and words of wisdom or correction to bring to my attention. The use of gentle questions was effective in opening my heart to see my own issues without proud defensiveness or argument.

A Brother Who Went beyond “How Are You?”

The day was a Tuesday, the place was my office. Steve (who’s another of my friends, brothers and co-laborers all wrapped into one) and I sat together to engage in fellowship. The conversation started ordinarily enough. He simply asked me how I was doing. So began a time of fellowship I will not soon forget. I won’t forget it because Steve went beyond “How are you?” to get to the heart.

He did what the members of TFC’s pastoral team are seeking increasingly to do. Consistently we ask each other about the state of our souls and we make sure to get as close as we can to those souls in the process. What follows is a summary of what happened in the hour and a half that followed.

A Sincere but Surface Answer

Steve caught me at an interesting moment. Since (and in part *because of*) Tim’s question alluded to earlier, I’d become more aware of a concern in my life, and now it was God’s time to bring it to a head. Here’s how I responded to Steve’s question: “I find that in my ministry there have been people that need my pastoral care to help them see sin issues in their lives, and I really don’t want

¹² Another fruit of the practiced use of specific questions is an ability to self-assess and self-counsel. Individuals can ask themselves questions which aid in their awareness of the issues and state of their own hearts, so that even when others are not present, the work of sanctification can proceed at full speed.

to do it.”¹³ This was a sincere but surface answer. It didn’t answer enough so that Steve knew he had to do fellowship’s *harder work*.

The Why Question

Respecting the answer that I had given him, and saying so, Steve pressed gently to help me see things I needed to see if I was going to go deeper in grace and godliness. He asked me, “Why don’t you want to do this pastoral work for people? What’s holding you back?” The *why* question: when we get asked it it takes us places within to which we may not be accustomed. But when Steve asked me it, I knew I was going places I needed to go.

An Issue Comes to the Surface

God’s amazing grace led me to shove aside the many excuses that quickly and insistently jostled for front brain position, and to try a rather novel approach: an honest answer. “I think it’s mostly fear”, I replied. With the answer I knew God had led me into a good place. I wasn’t hiding. I’d let a real sin issue (fear) come to the surface.

For a long time I’ve known Proverbs 28:13—“Whoever conceals his transgressions will not prosper, but he who confesses and forsakes them will obtain mercy.” But it’s one thing to know a verse; it’s another thing to practice it. Don’t get me wrong: it’s not that I don’t confess sin. I do, and I do it often and sincerely. But I began to realize in that moment that my confession is often surface and quick, the result of which is surface repentance and sorrow. Steve’s question took me deeper. But he wasn’t done.

¹³ In other words, my confession admitted that I was failing to do the *harder work* of fellowship and care. I have resisted the exhort one another and admonish one another dimensions of fellowship. If you are one who’d admit the same reticence and resistance toward fellowship’s harder work, you may find the rest of this conversation particularly relevant. It’s likely to reveal some heart reasons that are keeping you from doing what God is calling you and all Christians to do. As I share my heart issues which lie behind my resistance to this kind of care for others, you might well find yourself looking into a mirror. I dare you to read on.

Specific Question Arrows

I'm sure that most can guess what Steve's next question was. "So", he asked, "what are you afraid of?" Once this process begins the questions might seem a little predictable. One person says: "I'm afraid." The other responds: "What are you afraid of?" That seems easy enough. But be clear about this: while this may have been an easy question to think of, it was a gutsy question to ask.

Life's a lot neater when we tie up this kind of exchange with a glib verse of Scripture about "not being afraid because God is with you after all", followed by a promise to pray. A Scripture truth and a promise to pray; it sounds good, but it helps little. Such nice, neat "fellowship" allows the conscience to feel good about expressing some interest without having to do the real hard work of actually helping someone see their hearts.

Things can bog down and get a little messy when you go after sin specifics. Piercing the glib and the general with *specific question arrows* risks more time, more effort, more work. Exchanging general questions and answers which leads to general prayers and promises is the generally preferred "Christian" way. The only problem is that it leaves us with general repentance and a rather vague and non-specific awareness of grace!

So What Was I Afraid Of?

Pausing to think carefully and honestly I answered Steve's question like this. "I think I'm afraid of people's reactions; that they might get angry. They might accuse me of wrong or of failure. They might point out problems and issues they see in my life. They might criticize my pastoring. They might even leave the church.

"I've noticed", I continued, "that I find it easier to have hard conversations with people about their life issues when those issues have no connection to me at all, but are issues between those people and others. And to be honest, I think I'm also afraid of the hard work involved in the conversations I need to have with these people. Besides, I'm afraid of failure—that it just won't do much good."

Coming to Terms with Terms

Steve got an earful in that response, but he didn't give me one. He simply paused to let things sink in, and then asked, "Tim, let's think about this a bit. What are biblical terms for the fears you just described?" The guy wasn't convinced that I had really seen things clearly enough yet. He knew that it's one thing to admit some fears; it's quite another thing to call those fears what God does.

We humans are spiritual Houdinis. We try to escape blame whenever possible. And few things seem to loosen guilt's straight-jacket more effectively than simply not calling sin *sin*. We are skilled at euphemistic language, pleasant sounding words that mask the real evils, horrors, and unpleasantnesses of life (*eu* is Greek for good or pleasant; *pheme* is Greek for speech or words). Common euphemistic expressions would include: "Our loved one didn't *die*; he *passed on*"; "I didn't *lie*; I *stretched the truth*"; "It's not that I'm *angry and bitter*; I'm just *hurt and frustrated*." When it comes to sin issues we know how to escape guilty feelings by using guilt-releasing words.

Friends, repentance doesn't work well when we euphemize. Unless we come to terms with God's terms we're not going to come to terms with God. Steve wasn't trying to weigh me down with condemnation; on the other hand he didn't want me to escape conviction. He wasn't out to get me, but he was out to grace me. And he knew that grace is felt the most where sin is faced the most. "So Tim, how would God define and describe your fears?"

Escaping My Escape

I had heard about this concern about using God's terms before, but I'd seldom experienced anyone's attempts to draw me out from behind my own carefully crafted euphemistic shield. Steve coaxed me out and God made me willing to respond. Here are the specific sins the Spirit led me to confess, using God's terms instead of mine:

- *Fear of man.*¹⁴ When I do not speak with people as I should or when I withhold truth that others need to hear in order to avoid their anger, or

¹⁴ Proverbs 29:25—"The fear of man lays a snare, but whoever trusts in the LORD is safe."

criticism, or rejection, I am not functioning in the fear of God; I'm submitting to the fear of man.

- ***Pride¹⁵ and self-worship or idolatry.*** Pride is what keeps me from being open and even eager to receive the criticism and correction of others. My fear of rebuke or advice of others that I might face in hard conversations is little more than me “being wise in my own eyes’. In fact, I realized at that moment with Steve that my fear of criticism was an arrogance almost defying words. For implied in my fear of criticism is a presumption that I do not need it. In other words—it suddenly hit me—that I was pretending to be *above* criticism, which only God is, since only God is omniscient. I thought so highly of my own wisdom that I was assuming I needed no additions to it. Suddenly I realized that I wasn't merely afraid of criticism; I was trying to be and play God. The Bible calls that idolatry.
- ***Double-minded doubt, and unbelief.*** I told Steve that I realized that my fear was doubt and unbelief; that the heart of fear is unbelief in the goodness, love, promises and work of God. Later I thought about the disciples who feared to face a storm. Jesus asks them: “Why are you so afraid? Have you still so little faith?”¹⁶ Jesus' brother James calls those who fear not having wisdom from God to confront life's issues *doubting, double-minded* and *unstable*.¹⁷ I realized that my issue wasn't fear (as if my problem were people or circumstances outside of me making me afraid) so much as unbelief (a failure inside of me to take God at His word).
- ***Laziness and sloth.*** I realized my fear of the hard work and risks involved in such conversations was little more than laziness. I was being a *sluggard* making excuses of danger to avoid hard work.¹⁸

¹⁵ Proverbs 12:15—“The way of a fool is right in his own eyes, but a wise man listens to advice.”

¹⁶ Mark 4:40. By the way, notice Jesus' use of questions the answer to which He already knew. His questions invited them to explore the motivations and intentions of their own hearts.

¹⁷ James 1:5-8—“ If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given him. But let him ask in faith, with no doubting, for the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea that is driven and tossed by the wind. For that person must not suppose that he will receive anything from the Lord; he is a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways.”

¹⁸ Proverbs 22:13—“The sluggard says, ‘There is a lion outside! I shall be killed in the streets!’”

- ***Selfish failure to love.*** I realized that my failure to serve people in hard conversations, my failure to embrace the hard work, and my failure to believe that God would make good come of it all revealed a failure to love with 1 Corinthians 13 kind of love.¹⁹ I simply wasn't loving these people as Christ called me to love.

So there I sat with Steve, dealing with a level of conviction I'd not felt before. God's terms have a way of bringing sin into focus. It probably goes without saying that words like *fear of man, pride, unbelief, self-worship* and *idolatry, laziness, sluggard, and a failure to love* sound significantly more sinful than the simple word *fear* does. Behind and beneath fear and other less guilty sounding weaknesses²⁰ of ours there lies a host of *very real sins*, about which we should feel real and deep conviction. I was feeling it.

But Steve wasn't through.

Where Is God?

“So Tim, where do you think God is in all of this?” With the care and precision of a soul surgeon, Steve wounded a little more that God might heal a little deeper. This next question called attention to my relationship with my God in the face of my sinful fears and unbelief. The problem was much deeper than my not helping people who needed my help. The problem revealed something flawed in my relationship with God Himself.

Steve knows his Bible well. He's aware that sin, *all* sin, reflects ultimately a deficiency of relationship with God. Sin is our God replacement or God

¹⁹ 1 Corinthians 13:4-8a—“Love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends.”

²⁰ I do not mean to imply that *weakness* is not a true biblical category to describe the human condition. Not all sin is willful, deliberate, pre-meditated and malicious. We are all a combination of wicked and weak. Personal care in the church requires that we be sensitive to both dimensions in each other (see Hebrews 12:12, 13; 1 Thessalonians 5:14). Proper care of the body seeks to walk in each other's shoes sufficiently to discern whether a brother is struggling with willful sin issues or a weakness of faith and heart that needs comfort more than rebuke. This is another reason why careful listening and skillful questions are essential before we offer any counsel or rebuke.

supplement. Sin is man substituting himself (or something he cherishes or fears or desires) for God.²¹ Knowing this, Steve wanted me to see another level to my sin, one that would lead me to an even deeper place of repentance, and forgiveness.

Doubting and Dethroning God

It was an uncomfortable but essential process that led to my answer. I began to see what my sinful fears were saying about my thoughts about God. When directed against an all-wise and all-good Heavenly Father, doubts are not neutral, they're sinful. I began to realize this as I pondered my answer to Steve. Here's how I responded.

“Steve”, I said, “I realize that my sinful fears reveal sin in my attitudes toward God in at least these ways:

- I'm doubting His grace to enable me to do the difficult.
- I'm doubting His ability to change people.
- I'm doubting His strength to help me carry out hard work.
- I'm doubting His justifying grace toward me. If I really believed as I should that it is *God* who has justified and fully forgiven me I would not fear the accusations and criticisms of man.²²
- I'm wanting to be God. Since He alone is above criticism, my desire to be above it is a self-worshiping craving.
- I'm worshiping my own reputation, comfort, ease and desires instead of God. This is self-love more than God-love.”

So here's what was I doing: I was doubting and dethroning God. Through embracing the *harder work of fellowship*, Steve was leading my heart to see that my sin was much more serious than my earlier diagnosis had suggested.

An Inner Alarm

²¹ John Stott, *The Cross of Christ*

²² Romans 8:31-34—“What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things? Who shall bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. Who is to condemn? Christ Jesus is the one who died—more than that, who was raised—who is at the right hand of God, who indeed is interceding for us.”

Toward the middle of my last answer an alarm sounded within. Surprisingly (and gratefully) it wasn't warning of a "Steve-intruder" trespassing where he didn't belong. I was very happy Steve was pressing in where few had been before. The alarm I heard signaled a problem, not in Steve, but in my conscience.

As I analyzed my sins against God, diagnosing that my fears were doubting and dethroning Him, I began to detect a profound concern. I was confessing serious sins *without* feeling the seriousness of the sins. I was speaking of doubting and dethroning God as if I was talking about forgetting to take out the garbage or empty the dishwasher.

The Puritans used to talk about the need to understand and feel the *sinfulness of sin*. I wasn't. I was talking about playing God and doubting God with hardly a flutter of discomfort in my soul. I was naming sins without grieving them. I may not be the brightest guy around, but I knew that something was very *not right* about what was going on.

Did He Just Read My Mind?

Before I had opportunity to share my concern, Steve seemed to sense a need himself. Whether the secrets of my heart were revealed for my good²³, thereby enabling Steve to read my mind, or whether this was the God of grace simply giving my brother the wisdom He promises²⁴, the next question I heard pierced through to my soul:

"Tim, I don't want to create condemnation and the wrong kind of guilt, but I want to help you experience true conviction and repentance. So can I ask you this: are you feeling the true nature and guilt of these sins you are confessing, and a real conviction over them?"

Notice the word *feeling*. Steve was concerned that I not merely recite my sins; he wanted to help me repent of them. And repentance includes some measure

²³ 1 Corinthians 14:24, 25—"But if all prophesy, and an unbeliever or outsider enters, he is convicted by all, he is called to account by all, the secrets of his heart are disclosed, and so, falling on his face, he will worship God and declare that God is really among you."

²⁴ James 1:5-8

of *feeling*: sorrow, grief, remorse, the kind of mourning that leads to promises of comfort²⁵. My soul surgeon wanted to make sure that he cut deeply enough so that I would feel the “true nature and guilt of my sins”, the very experience my inner alarm had just signaled I was not having.

Thank You Steve

I was affected to my soul. I knew God was up to something, and God enabling me, I was determined to see it through. In my gratitude, I responded to Steve’s wounding skill in the following way:

“Thank you Steve. You discerned my need. I hear the right words coming out of my mouth, but I don’t feel the right conviction in my heart. I’m not sure what to do next, but I don’t think I should go on simply talking about it anymore; I think I need to pray.”

All Steve said in response, was: “Let’s do it.” And we did. More strictly speaking: I did.

A Work of Grace for Me

And thus I was led into one of the more personal and life-affecting prayers of my 35 year Christian experience. As I began the Spirit’s first work of grace was to alert me to avoid any use of “we” or “us” in my prayer. As a pastor who prays often with people, I’ve grown accustomed to going into the we and us approach: “Lord, help *us*. Lord, forgive *us*. Lord, *we* need your grace.” But this wasn’t Steve and me confessing sin and needing grace; it was me. I am so grateful the Spirit made me realize that. With His help I was able to keep all the plurals out of my prayer. In this moment, *I* needed to do business with God. Steve was merely a witness.

A Prayer for Convicting Grace

While I cannot reproduce my prayer that Tuesday afternoon exactly, the following reproduces its content and intent with faithful accuracy, without embellishment:

²⁵ It is mourning over our poverty of spirit (sin) that receives our Lord Jesus’ promise of comfort in Matthew 5:3, 4.

*“Dear Father in Heaven,
Please lead me to understand and feel the sin of my heart.
Help me to see sin as you do, and not to hide it or hide from it in any way.
Lord, please bring to mind truths that will lead me to convicting grace.*

*Lord, I see how my sin must grieve your heart. I see how:
My self-worship is so ungrateful and wicked in the face of all the gifts and grace I
have received from your kind hand;
My self-worship is so wrong in light of Your great love for me displayed in the
cross;
My fear of criticism is so much an act of self-deification, revealing that I want
people to think of me and treat me as if I’m perfect;
And my fear of criticism is so much an act of unbelief in Your gospel grace, for
‘Who can bring a charge against your elect o Lord; it is You who have justified
me’.*

*And O Lord, I confess that I have too often healed my own sins too lightly,
hurrying through confession and repentance so quickly that I have felt little or no
sorrow; little or no remorse; few or no tears.
How rarely have I been willing to think and pray long and deeply enough to ever
feel my sins or weep over them.
O Father forgive my hasty and hardened heart.²⁶*

*Please forgive me for Jesus’ sake. Thank you for the cross. Thank you for your
grace. Thank you for your Spirit’s work of mercy.
In Jesus’ Name. Amen*

So ended my prayer, and so began my joy. Fellowship had done its hard work yielding God’s sweet grace. And yet, the conversation wasn’t over.

I Want you to See Christ

²⁶ As I prayed it came to mind with deep sorrowful conviction that I could not remember the last time I had been willing to spend this amount of time thinking about and confessing my specific sins. Since *only those who are very conscious that they have been forgiven much will love much* (Luke 7:47) I realized in that moment that by avoiding times of deep remorse and repentance, I had neglected a God appointed opportunity to grow in my love for Christ and amazement at grace.

You might think that with such a result, Steve’s fellowship work was done. The hard work of fellowship was complete for the moment, but there was a little more grace and joy work to do. Steve wasn’t content to leave me convicted of sin. He wanted me glorying in Christ. So he added one more question: “Tim, how does the gospel speak to you in this moment? Is there a gospel text that comes to mind to speak grace to your heart?” In effect, my brother was saying: “I want you to see Christ more than your sin.”

An Advocate with the Father

The Holy Spirit was kind. He brought to my mind a text almost as quickly as He had led Steve to ask the question. It is a robust gospel passage, the application of which was rich and sweet to my heart:

“If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. If we say we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us. My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin. But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous. He is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world.” (1 John 1:8-2.2)

This verse spoke grace to my soul. May it do so to all our hearts as we contemplate the commitment of fellowship to which we are called.

I was struck by the words: “If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us.” John reiterates: “If we say we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us.” That was me at the beginning of my conversation with Steve, and most of us in our shallow confessions of sin to God and others. By our careless and superficial confessions we say in effect: “Lord, we have no sin; or at least none on which it is worth spending too much time or weeping too many tears.” Steve’s fellowship helped me get over my self-deluded smugness. Deceiving myself, I was living a lie. He helped me see the truth *about* myself that I couldn’t see *by* myself. That’s what fellowship does.

As for John's following words, who can say enough: *"If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness."* This has to be the Bible's best known forgiveness text, and with good reason. Praise God for forgiving grace!

"My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin. But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous." God doesn't want us to sin, but we do. Sin happens because we're sinners still. But as surely as we're going to sin, Jesus is going to plead our case. We're never without an Advocate and High Priest before the Father. We're in a good standing before God because we're in the good hands of Christ.

A God Appeased

"He is the propitiation for our sins." Jesus Christ has atoned for our sins thereby taking away the wrath of God over those sins. If sin is man substituting himself for God, salvation is God substituting Himself for man, appeasing His own just wrath over our sin that we might go free.²⁷ Jesus bore my hell for my sins so that I would not have to. This is why I'm able to confess my sins to God (and others) and why God is "faithful and *just*" to forgive them.

Putting Amazing back into Grace

All these thoughts poured into my head in response to the Holy Spirit's work of grace through Steve's gospel saturated questions. 1 John 1:8-2:2 never meant more to me than in this moment. It had sudden fresh relevance to me. And this process did something else for me: it put the *amazing* back into grace! Thinking about my sin in the light of the cross did not overwhelm me with shame and guilt, it made me amazed at grace and more in love with Jesus.

That's what radical biblical gospel saturated fellowship will do, even when (and perhaps *especially* when) it is willing to do the *harder work* of fellowship:

²⁷ "The essence of sin is man substituting himself for God, while the essence of salvation is God substituting Himself for man. Man asserts himself against God and puts himself where only God deserves to be; God sacrifices Himself for man and puts Himself where only man deserves to be. Man claims prerogatives which belong to God alone; God accepts penalties which belong to man alone" (John Stott).

admonition, warning and sin confrontation. This is what we all are called to pursue.

A Postscript

Not long after my conversation with Steve, I shared the experience with my care group. They all listened intently and seemed affected. There were a few excellent comments and questions for me. One of the questions was huge. A sister in Christ asked, “Hey Tim, did you talk to the people yet?”

We all laughed a knowing laugh. She had nailed a big time concern, one we often overlook. It doesn’t do us much good to talk about our sins if we don’t do anything about putting them to death. True repentance is not merely sorrow over wrongs done; it involves a purpose and plan to stop doing them.

By God’s grace I was able to report that I’d already begun to have the conversations I needed to have. And by God’s grace I’ve continued in this, and I’m implementing a plan to consistently offer people my *harder work fellowship* to serve their souls with truth and grace. While God’s not finished with me yet, His work is further along today than it was before that wonderful Tuesday afternoon conversation with one of my life’s soul surgeons.

May God so work in us all.

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